

this crumbling world overrun by nature and Men

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this crumbling world overrun by nature and Men

by [hump7y_dump7y](#)

Summary

“Tommy,” the Man-with-the-pale-mask breathes out. “You can speak, can’t you?” Tommy stops. His teeth ache and his arms burn, but he can’t help but stop at the sound of his own name. The other Man, the one with the gun, has empty eyes. He’s silent as he holds Tommy against the ground, but his grip shifts at the question.

Tommy has heard the stories. He knows who they are: the Last Men. Sam taught him well.

OR

[A Sweet Tooth AU where Tommy is a hybrid and Sam does his best to protect him until he no longer can].

it's a difficult thing, letting go. it's tough to say goodbye.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! I'm so excited to finally be able to share this fic. It's taken about 3 months to write, and it's the longest thing I've ever written and FINISHED. I'll be posting one chapter each week.

Content warnings are in the tags, and chapter specific ones will be in the end notes. Go look if you want! Please let me know if I forget anything, and you can always message me if you want more details on a chapter.

No knowledge of Sweet Tooth is needed!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Tommy,” the Man-with-the-pale-mask breathes out. “You can speak, can’t you?” Tommy stops. His teeth ache and his arms burn, but he can’t help but stop at the sound of his own name. He hasn’t heard it in so, so long. How does this Man know his name? The other Man, the one with the gun, has empty eyes. He’s silent as he holds Tommy against the ground, but his grip shifts at the question. Tommy hisses. He doesn’t like how the Man-with-the-pale-mask says his name. Tommy has heard the stories. He knows who they are: the Last Men. Sam taught him well. If their long, dark clothes and partially covered faces didn’t give them away, the way they tried to shoot him on sight certainly does.

Tommy’s ears still sting from the growl of the gun pale-mask now throws over his shoulder. The strap curls around him, away but not out of sight, as he kneels down into the mud. Tommy doesn’t understand why, and he really doesn’t understand when a fingerless, gloved hand reaches out towards him. The Man holding him down suddenly speaks, and Tommy tenses up at the nervous, almost concealed lilt of his voice. “Dream—”

“—Shh...” pale-mask says as cuts him off, and Tommy strains his head to be able to see the hand. He can’t focus on the rest of what is said, but he can feel the way his breathing begins to pick up. If that hand reaches any lower, Tommy is going to bite it. Pale-mask isn’t going to fucking touch him. He tries one last attempt to twist away, but the grip on his arms tightens again and the hand is there and Tommy swears to god he’s going to take a finger off—“Tommy, shh...”

Tommy stops again, because he can’t help it. *Tommy, shh, I’m here nookling.* He squeezes his eyes shut, but the hand doesn’t tug or pull — it gently pushes through his hair. This *isn’t* Sam. Sam’s *not here*, but the words are so familiar, and the touch remains. It’s safe just like Sam always was.

Tommy doesn't know what to do when he feels a rumble start in his chest. These men tried to kill him only a few minutes ago. These men *would have* killed him if he hadn't accidentally cussed them out. These men are the Last Men, but as the hand pushes through Tommy's hair again, a purr finally breaks free from his throat. He opens his eyes and looks back up at that pale mask. The smile carved into it stares down at him.

Pale-mask asks him to speak again, and despite everything Sam taught him about this crumbling world overrun by nature and Men, Tommy answers.

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Tommy wakes to a hand against his mouth. He flinches, ready to sink his teeth into it before his vision adjusts to the face in front of him. It's Sam. It's *Sam's hand*. "Ppham?"

Tommy's eyes were made for the dark. He can see the way Sam jerks his head from side to side in a very clear sign to *shut up*. There's a creak above their heads that makes his ears twitch, and a cold rush settles over him. Tommy suddenly understands. Someone's *here*. Someone's in their house.

Sam finally moves his hand away. "Stay close," he whispers. He switches a rifle from over his back and into his hands and arms it with a click. Tommy's ears twitch at the sound. He doesn't want Sam to have to shoot it. The growl is loud and it hurts his ears. Tommy looks up at Sam and nods anyway. He grabs Henry off the bed and holds him close as Sam leads them through the dark with quiet, calculated footsteps.

Tommy tries to listen for more creaks, but it's difficult to hear anything over his own breaths — short and weak with a fear he can't quite drive back. He clings to Sam until they reach a staircase.

Sam carefully lifts the handle concealed on the underside. The staircase makes no noise as it opens, and once the space is big enough, Sam pushes him inside. Tommy stumbles but crouches down into the dark just like he was told. The only problem is that Sam *isn't coming too*. "Sam?" he whispers shakily.

"It's going to be okay. Do you remember what I taught you?" Sam's voice is serious, just like all the times he's tried to teach Tommy something. This time, though, there's no lightness to it, and Tommy shakes his head frantically.

He squeezes Henry with one hand and grips onto Sam's sleeve with the other. "Don't go! What if it's the bad men?"

"Shh, I said it's going to be okay, nookling. If I hear a growl?"

Tommy grips the shirt-sleeve tighter. The first three things Sam taught him were probably the first three things Tommy *ever* remembered him saying. He wasn't a particularly fast learner,

but by his second birthday he could recite them by heart. This time is no different. "I will duck," he whispers.

"If I hear a voice?"

"I will run."

"If I see a human?"

Tommy lets out a low, quiet chitter, but he answers. He knows he has to answer. "I will hide."

"Good," Sam says with a smile, and the staircase closes. Tommy hugs Henry as close as he can and curls his tail around himself. He tries to imagine it's Sam — still here and not out there with the bad men. There are a few cracks in the wood that let him see part of the room, but by the time he looks through them Sam is gone. Tommy hears the growl of a gun go off. He's so scared, so sure this is the last time he'll ever see Sam again.

This time it's not.

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"If you act like a wild animal we'll treat you like one," Dream says all matter-of-fact like. It really pisses Tommy off, but he holds back another growl. The rope on his skin itches, and his jaw hurts from the gag they forced into his mouth. It's not *his* fault that he bit Punz. He's not a wild animal, but he isn't just going to let someone, Last Man or not, touch him like he's some Pre-Crumble zoo animal. Fuck that.

"That's because he is one," Punz retorts, voice low and clipped. His eyes flicker to Tommy and then back down at the fire. The bandage on his hand has already started to bleed through.

"Fuh ooh, bhih!"

Dream suddenly gets up from the log he was sitting on, and Tommy stills. The steps are quiet even as they get closer, but he can hear every single one. They crash in his ears until Dream stops in front of him. Tommy doesn't like that he can't see past the Man's mask. He doesn't like how unsafe he suddenly feels. He doesn't like Dream.

"You're not a wild animal, are you, Tommy?" Tommy curls in on himself and shakes his head as he looks up at the Last Man, and Dream nods in approval. "And you aren't going to bite anyone again?" Tommy hates the questions, but he agrees because he knows something bad will happen if he doesn't.

Dream reaches down to slowly take the gag off, and then he shoves it back in one of his many pockets. Tommy wants to say something about how gross that is, but he can't get any words past the dryness in his throat. He coughs a few times to try and get rid of the feeling, and there's suddenly a hand in his hair.

“Good boy,” Dream says. Tommy shudders. The glove should feel rough as it brushes against his forehead, but it’s not. Dream pushes the hair out of his eyes and the touch is just as gentle the first time. This time it doesn’t remind him of Sam. He couldn’t even pretend if he wanted to. It’s nice, but it’s bad too. How can something feel nice and bad at the same time?

“Now, we want to know how you can talk.”

“Bullshit,” Tommy mutters, and Dream’s hand stops just below one of his ears. There has to be more to it than that. There’s something wrong with Punz, and there’s something doubly wrong with Dream. The Last Men don’t just keep a hybrid alive, and even if they can talk, they definitely don’t treat them like this.

“Do you think I’m a liar?” Dream’s hand suddenly leaves, and Tommy doesn’t know whether to sigh or whine at the loss. The words that pass through his throat burn.

“You *always* fucking lie, you’re Last Men.”

Punz chuckles from his place over by the fire. “Seems like someone taught your pet his stuff, Dream.” Tommy tenses at the word. Pet. Sam never talked about pets when he talked about the Last Men. Pets were from the Pre-Crumble. They were kept by humans for entertainment. Tommy growls. It sounds wild — and maybe that’s what it is — because Tommy will happily be a wild animal before he ever becomes someone’s fucking hybrid *pet*.

Dream’s laugh is short and breathy. “You’re right,” he agrees, “but he’s not just a pet.” There’s a smile underneath his mask. Tommy doesn’t have to see Dream’s face to know that now. “He’s so much more important than that.”



Sam comes back into the room with a giant ball in his hands. It takes Tommy a few seconds to figure out what it is, both because he’s only seen it a few times, and because he’s warm and comfortable curled up half-asleep on the couch. Henry is tucked snuggly in his arms. “Tha—” Tommy tries to ask only to be cut off by his own yawn. “—That the Earth?”

“That’s right,” Sam says as he lugs it over to the couch and sets it down on a cushion with a huff. Tommy diverts his attention from it the second Sam sits back down. He jumps onto Sam and presses his head into his chest. One of his hands bunches up Sam’s shirt and the other holds Henry close. “—Ooph,” Sam exhales when Tommy falls on him, “you’re getting *big*.”

“Course I am, m’ a Big Man! Anyway, I already know about the Earth,” Tommy huffs. Sam chuckles and sets a hand on the back of his head. The touch is warm and Tommy sinks into it.

“I know, my nookling, but there’s more I wanted to tell you.” Tommy still doesn’t know what the nickname means, but his purr crackles into the air. It’s been the same one since he was barely old enough to know he could even purr at all.

“Why do you call me nookling?”

Sam’s face scrunches up, and Tommy resists the urge to laugh. “Well, the Earth here might help me explain, actually.” Sam takes the Earth off the couch cushion and sets it on the floor below them. Tommy looks down, and his eyes trace the grooves and lines of the place they apparently live. “You remember those bad men I told you about?” Tommy looks back up at Sam and nods. “They weren’t *just* bad men. Bad people used to rule the Earth.”

“Humans?”

“Yes, humans. Now, these humans, these people who ruled did what they wanted and took what they wanted from the planet. They were greedy, self-destructive, only out for themselves.”

“Is that why we have the Rule?”

Sam nods his head, but it’s no longer enthusiastic. “Yes, that’s why we have the Rule... Nature made everyone sick, and she wiped away as many as she could, but a miracle also happened. Hybrids were born. No one knows where your kind came from or how, but many, many people died.”

“The bad people?”

“Some,” Sam muses. “Some of them weren’t just bad. Some of them are still bad. The bad men are meaner now, angrier. They fear hybrids because they think you made everyone sick, but you didn’t, Tommy. They just fear you because you’re different.”

Tommy thinks for a moment. “Hmm, they’re just stupid then! ...But what does this have to do with you calling me a nookling?”

Sam sighs, and he pushes a hand through Tommy’s hair. “Life used to be much different, but it also used to be kind of the same too. You know the stories we make up together?” Tommy hums in agreement, and his eyes slip shut before he can stop them. “There was this character that I used to like called Tom Nook, and he had two sons, or maybe nephews. I’m not sure actually. They were called Timmy and Tommy.”

Tommy’s eyes shoot open and he looks up at Sam with a scowl. “Tommy?! But that’s my name!”

“That’s who I named you after. He’s also a raccoon,” Sam explains, and he must look down at the expression on Tommy’s face because he laughs. It’s high and breathy, and despite the way the sound makes Tommy warm, he won’t put up with it.

“Wha— stop laughing! I wasn’t named after him! He was named after me!”

“I don’t know...” Sam says as he finally stops, “Technically, you were born after the game came out.”

Tommy chitters. “Fine! If I have to be Tommy, then you have to be Tom Nook— you have to be Sam Nook!”

Sam presses their foreheads together. “Alright then, Big Man, I can be Sam Nook.”



Dream’s grip is tight on his arm as they approach the giant wooden doors. What did Punz call them earlier? A check... a checkpoint. Tommy doesn’t really know what that means, but he does know it’s the only way to enter and exit out of this place. He glances back at Punz, who’s been trailing behind them as they walk. The Man raises an eyebrow at him, and Tommy can practically hear the words even though he doesn’t say anything: *What are you gonna do?* Nothing. He wants to cuss the Man out some more — maybe bite him again, but he knows what will happen.

He already tried to escape from the camp earlier — bit through the rope that tied his hands and feet and made a run for it. Tommy can still hear the disappointment like poison in Dream’s voice: *“We’ve treated you good so far, Tommy. Better than we could have. But maybe you should learn what it’s like when we’re not so generous.”* His stomach still aches. Dream didn’t give him any food that night.

He looks up at the armed men atop the wall. Some of them wear dark clothes. Most have half, if not fully covered faces — just like Dream and Punz. All of them are Last Men. It’s an entire place full of Last Men. It doesn’t matter what Tommy thinks now. If he couldn’t get away at the camp, he’s never going to get away from here.

“Open the doors! It’s me!” Dream yells up at one of the men. He looks down at them, and his eyes are covered by two circular things. The Man nods, and not a second later there’s a groan. Tommy’s ears flatten at the noise, but it drags on and on and doesn’t stop until the doors are completely open. He peers inside, but what he sees is nothing like what he expected.

It isn’t dark or filled with fire. Sam once told him that *nature set the rest of the Earth on fire, but some of the bad people are still out there, Tommy, in the flames, waiting.* He later told Tommy that that wasn’t true — not at all. It was just an easier way to keep him from getting too curious when he was younger. Some part of Tommy never really stopped believing the story.

Roof-topped houses lined with front yards, just barely visible down the street, tell him a different one though. He thought this place was a Last Men camp. He thought it’d be filled with cages and weapons or maybe a bunch of enslaved hybrids. Why are there houses here? Surely The Last Men don’t live in them.

“Dream,” a calm voice greets, and the Man with the circles around his eyes jumps down a ladder that rests against the side of the wall. He wipes an arm against his forehead as he walks up to them. The Man is clearly about to say something more, before his eyes shift onto

Tommy. "Wow. I've never seen a raccoon one before. Why is it still alive though?" *It* — like he's some kind of animal.

Tommy glances up at Dream's face, and the grip on his arm tightens. It's a warning, and Tommy listens. He keeps his mouth shut. "More profit that way," Dream finally answers, but it isn't what Tommy expected. Why would Dream lie about him? Does he not want the other Last Men to know why he's here, or if he's here at all? *Is Dream even lying?*

The Man looks at Dream for a moment. Tommy has a feeling he doesn't believe him, but he doesn't say anything either. He just shrugs and turns his attention past their heads. "Nice to see you too, Punz."

"George," Punz states, voice flat but not entirely unfriendly. George. That must be this Last Man's name.

"Oh, and George? Tell Bad I need to speak with him," Dream requests as he pulls Tommy's arm forward again. It's not towards the houses. He wishes they were going towards the houses.

George's posture suddenly straightens, and his eyes don't quite fall on Dream as they did before. "Yes, General," he responds. It's terse. It's obedient. Dream wasn't asking. He was ordering. Tommy's gut sinks. There's something wrong with this place.



April is Tommy's favorite month. He loves to pick yellow wildflowers and put them in baskets, his ears never itch from the heat, birds flit around the trees, and bugs crawl out from under their rocks. *"You want to know why April is my favorite month? Because it's when I found you!"* Well, maybe there are a few more reasons, but that's beside the point.

His point is that April is awesome.

That's why Tommy swings a basket filled with flowers in his hand as he walks home. He's not quite able to hold back a yawn. He's tired, but he can't wait to see where Sam puts all the flowers he picked this time. Sometimes he'll place them around the house — on sills and shelves still annoyingly out of Tommy's reach. Other times, he likes to put them in his hair. Tommy always laughs when he sees Sam walking around with a bunch of flowers sticking out of his hair.

It's nearly dark by the time Tommy gets home. He pulls the door open and fills his lungs with as much air as possible. "Oh, Sammy! I'm home!" Kicking his shoes off without a care as to where they fly, Tommy shoots into the kitchen. Sam is sitting at a chair by the bar table. His back is to Tommy, but he doesn't turn and look at him like he normally does. He doesn't greet Tommy with a yell or a ruffle of his hair. Tommy freezes. "Sam? You okay there?"

Sam turns his head, but there's a weird look on his face. His eyes are blank, but he must realize because a smile quickly covers up the expression. Tommy's ears fold. The basket in his hand falls to the ground. "Seriously," he presses as he rushes over to Sam's side, "what happened? Someone didn't try to kill you, did they?" Tommy tries to joke, but it comes out wrong. His voice shakes too much.

"I love you, Tommy. I always will," Sam states, but his voice breaks as he lifts a hand up. Tommy is about to ask what's going on. Why would Sam say that? He looks down at Sam's hand, and a sob crawls up and out of his throat. It's such a small thing, but it's still noticeable. It's still there.

Sam told him what it means when your fingers begin to shake. That's the first sign — one so powerful that it made the entire world crumble underneath it.

"No! No, this can't be happening! Nobody lives here but us! Sam—"

"—I know, shh," Sam whispers as he reaches up and places a hand on Tommy's cheek. He wipes a tear away as it falls, but more come after. "I know, but nature takes whoever she wants. And sometimes it isn't just the bad men."

"I don't— I'm scared. Sam, I'm scared," Tommy whines. He doesn't want Sam to go. He doesn't want Sam to die! Sam is going to die, Sam is going to *die*— What is he supposed to do without him? He won't survive, he won't survive by himself—

"—Shh, it's going to be okay, my nookling, because you are smart, and so, so special, and I taught you everything I know. If I hear a growl?"

Tommy crashes into Sam's chest and buries his head in the crook of his collarbone. He refuses to answer the questions. He sobs. He begs Sam not to leave him. He doesn't want this to be the last time he ever sees Sam. It *can't* be the last time.

This time it is.

It's the last April they ever have together.

Tommy stops liking April.



Tommy doesn't know how long it's been since Dream locked him in this room. He paces the walls like a caged animal in search of escape and wonders if maybe that's what he is. There isn't one: no cracks in the walls, no windows, and no vents. He can't tell what time it is. He can't even see the sky. A simple bed with a side table pushed up against one wall, and that's it.

It's the first time Tommy has been stuck with his thoughts in a long, long time. In the past, he's always had something to do. Something he's *had* to do to survive after Sam—Now, it's too quiet. Too still. Tommy has always had a hard time not thinking when it's quiet.

This room reminds him of the houses outside, because he's finally realized what they are: a town. — like the ones that existed before the Great Crumble. Tommy still doesn't know why they live here. He doesn't know why *he*'s here. Dream still hasn't told him, but he did say he would "be back soon." Whatever that means. *Whenever* that means. Tommy wouldn't particularly mind if he never saw the Last Man again if it didn't mean he'd slowly starve to death in here.

The quiet makes him think about Dream too.

Dream was the first Last Man to ever find him, and George had called him "General." Tommy doesn't know what that means, but it has to be a title. Who is he though: leader of the Last Men here, or all Last Men? The thought of either scares Tommy. He wishes he could ask Sam. He wishes Sam were here.

His ears raise and he backs away from whatever breaks the silence. It's someone turning the doorknob. It's Dream. "Tommy," he greets as he steps into the room, and the door closes with a clack behind him. Surprisingly, he doesn't lock it this time. Tommy doesn't respond. He curls his tail around his leg and waits to see what Dream will do. "Oh, don't be like that," he scolds. "I know it was a little boring, but I wasn't gone *that* long."

"Are you gonna tell me why I'm here?"

"I am," Dream agrees, and he reaches into his pocket. Tommy backs up more, so sure it's going to be something bad. It is. It's a purple flower that barely fits into the palm of Dream's hand. "Whoever took care of you taught you a lot, but I want to know how much. Do you know what this is?"

Tommy hesitates. "How do you know I didn't just teach myself?"

"No hybrid that can talk is self-taught. Someone had to have taken you in and raised you. What is this?" Tommy looks at the flower again.

"It's... a flower."

"I know you're lying," Dream sighs. Tommy tenses at the disappointment, but he has nowhere to go as the distance closes between them. His back is already up against the wall. His ears are flat. His tail is curled around his leg. It couldn't be more obvious that he wants Dream to *stay away*, but the man doesn't stop his approach until he's right in front of him. He's too close. His hand is too close.

"Don't touch me!" Tommy growls out. He doesn't want Dream's hand to push through his hair. He doesn't know why he ever let it happen to begin with. It isn't comforting. It isn't. The bruises on his arms burn.

“You’ve been alone for a long time. Was it poachers... or was it this little flower in my hand?”

Tommy grits his teeth, but the words shoot out of his mouth anyway. “Shut up! You don’t know anything!”

“But I do. I do understand. You see, there are two types of people in this world. Those who simply let this dreadful, ugly, monstrous virus kill them and their loved ones. Just like your guardian, Tommy. Then you’ve got soldiers. People who are willing to do whatever it takes to beat this disgusting disease, take back control, reclaim humanity... Guess which one I am.” Dream raises his hand high enough to make sure Tommy can see the flower clearly before he crushes it underneath his fingers.

Tommy’s chest burns, but not at the action — at the realization. His hands shake. He’s scared. He’s angry. He wants to hide. He wants to kill Dream. He wants Sam. “You’re not a person, you’re a monster,” he whispers.

Tommy finally understands why he was brought here, and he bites Dream deep enough to leave a scar.

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The ribbon twirls in the air, tied to one of the spaces in the fence Tommy has never dared cross before. It’s bright orange — a stark contrast against the cloudy afternoon sky. He sees it by accident, and his hands clench white against the strap of his leather bag. There’s only one reason why there’d be a ribbon here, but he doesn’t want to believe it. He has to be sure. There’s another one a little further down, and another, and another. *Fuck*—

Tommy runs. His feet pound against the still damp earth. His heart beats wildly, but the feeling is covered up by broken, shuddery breaths. As his feet crash onto the wooden porch of their— of *his* house, he can suddenly smell it. The wind tries to blow the scent away, but the rain holds it down to the earth long enough to wash over him.

Tommy slams the front door open and it crashes harshly against the wall. He was never smart enough to fix the broken hinge on it anyway. His leather bag slides off his shoulder and hits the floor. It’s useless now too. *Sam*— Sam warned him about this.

It was his fourteenth birthday when he was told more than just the truth. Sam told him as much as he knew. It’s been two years since then, but Tommy remembers well. The ribbons can only mean one thing. It means this place has been marked.

He can’t hide here any longer.

The Last Men have found him.

Tommy stumbles through the house — through so many memories that don't matter anymore. Henry is sat on the couch, and his black button eyes stare up at Tommy. He looks at the little red cow one last time.

There's an emergency pack hidden at the other door of the house. It's filled with anything Tommy could think of in the event that he has to leave this place for good. He made it after — he made it after. There are a few water bottles in it, a canteen, a sleeping bag, as many preserved snacks as he could get his hands on, and the hunting knife he got on his tenth birthday.

He finds the bag right where he left it. There's a gun that rests on the wall with a couple of bullets already loaded inside. Tommy shoves them both over his shoulder as fast as he can and slams the next door open with his arms. He doesn't know where he's going, but he has to get to the opposite fence line from where the ribbons were. He has to break the Rule.

The scent of the Men is closer by the time he reaches the perimeter, but he doesn't think they're close enough to spot him yet. If he hurries, he might get out before they ever see him.

His muddy boots slot into the spaces of the fence, and Tommy climbs. The weight on his back slows him, but he lands on the other side without dropping anything. He's out, and the thought makes him freeze for a second.

What do we never, ever do?

He broke Sam's rule. He finally did. His feet are on the wrong side of the fence, and although it doesn't look any different than usual, it feels different. It feels like the rest of the world is wide, open chasm, and he has no idea what exists within it other than danger.

Tommy doesn't look back until he reaches the sign.

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

There used to be a house, protected and locked away in the remote wilderness of some Pre-crumble park, and there used to be a man who lived there named Sam. He was Tommy's entire world. His caretaker. His protector. His *dad*. Eventually, though, everything crumbles. Everything is overrun.

Tommy looks back and says goodbye to his home for the last time.

He makes it two days before the Last Men find him.



His foot hits the ground with a crack, but even if he didn't hear the impact, Tommy would know by the way the pain burns up his leg. It's fire. It's wrong. It makes him want to keel

over and puke, but he can't stop. He *can't*. His foot is wrong, but nothing has been right for a long time, not since Sam died, not since Dream—not since Dream found him.

Tommy presses all the momentum he can into his good foot and takes another step forward. He doesn't know how long he keeps running, but he manages to get just a little further away from *that place* before he hears a scream. It sounds far away and yet so close. It sounds familiar. “—mmy! Tommy!” It's his name. It's Dream. Tommy drags the whine that wants to come out of his throat down. He doesn't want to imagine what Dream will do if he finds him. He doesn't want to imagine how he'll survive *without* Dream either. He's nothing without Dream. He shouldn't have ever left.

Tommy keeps running anyway.

He can almost touch the forest ahead of him when his ears raise. “*Fuck*,” he whispers, and ducks into the grass as low as he can. The unmistakable green of Dream's cloak hits his eyes not a second later. The man emerges from the forest just ahead, gun held tight in his hands. There's another man behind him with another gun in his hands. It's like the first time he met Dream all over again: Punz is still by his side.

“I know you're here, Tommy,” Dream says as he tilts his head up. Tommy clamps a hand over his mouth to stifle his gasps. This can't be it. He can't be caught now. He's so, *so* close to the edge of the forest. If he can just make it through the treeline, he can lose them for good. Dream will never be able to hurt him again. “I know you're scared, but if you come back now, it'll all be okay. I won't be mad. I'll protect you.”

Tommy shakes. The wind brushes against his ears, and it feels like a gentle pair of hands. Sam's hands. Dream's hands. Dream is lying. He's a liar. Is he? The gun he holds goes back over his shoulder in some sign of safety, and Punz reluctantly follows a moment later. Tommy hesitates. What if he does go back? Dream said he wouldn't be mad, but—no. Tommy *can't*. That's wrong. This is wrong. He remembers all the other times Dream said that to him. There are scars on his legs and finger-shaped bruises on his arms. His stomach aches. He can still hear Bad's voice in his head and the scratch of pencil on paper. He still feels guilt, so much guilt for leaving.

Sometimes Dream reminds him of Sam. His Sam Nook. That scares him more than any kind of pain ever will. Tommy is scared of the day he won't want to leave at all, and that's why he has to.

“Don't make this harder than it has to be,” Punz states. His eyes are still empty, and Tommy knows now that they always were.

“A new Wave is coming, Tommy, and you understand better than anyone why we need to find a Cure,” Dream stresses.

Tommy does, and he doesn't. He hates the Sick. The Sick took Sam away from him. He doesn't want anything like that to happen to anyone *ever*, but this isn't right. He doesn't care how many people it will save. What the Last Men doing to him, what Dream is doing to him— it isn't right.

Tommy hates the Sick, but he hates Dream more. That's why when the wind shifts again, he crashes into the forest line and runs.

The growl of a gun goes off and a bullet flies over his head.

Dream screams.

Tommy keeps running, forever, always forever, and then he feels nothing at all as he hits the ground.

Chapter End Notes

CW: emotional manipulation, abuse, dehumanization, implied deterioration/loss of loved one, brief description of leg injury

me: so if Sam raised Tommy and he's American, how is Tommy British??
also me: he's British because I said so

I hope you enjoyed this first chapter. Feel free to leave a comment (even just a POG)!

See you guys next week :)

some stories start at the beginning, ours begins here

Chapter Notes

Hi, I'm back! I hope y'all have had a great week.

Last chapter was more of an introduction. This one is where things will really begin to develop. Enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy wakes up, and the first thing he feels is warmth. He breathes in and out. He's warm. It's calm. He hasn't woken up calm since Sam— *Sam. Dream*—

His eyes shoot open to a blue-green sky. He's outside. He's *wrapped up in a sleeping bag*.

What?

“You’re finally awake,” *a man* says, and Tommy flinches away from their voice. It’s low, and the lack of emotion in it scares him.

He devises some sort of plan to wiggle himself out of the sleeping bag and run, before he looks at— looks *up*, at the man sitting to his left. He's *huge*, with a blue and gold cloak wrapped around his shoulders, hair a light pale pink, and there's— of all things, there's a jewel-studded *crown* on his head. Tommy freezes. He's dead the second he's caught by this Man, because there's no way he's not one. No normal human looks like this.

His eyes flit around, but he's ready to bolt at the slightest of movement. There are miles of untamed wilderness that stretch across his vision, and a river not far off that he could swim across if he has to. A gun rests on the other side of an empty fire pit next to him. It's not in the Man's hands, not yet — but it could be. Supplies are strewn across the ground. There's even a *horse* tied up to a tree a couple of feet away. This must be the Man's camp.

Tommy flattens his ears and tucks his tail close to his body. He tries to make himself smaller as his eyes settle back on the Man's blank face. He still doesn't say anything, but there's a glint in his eyes — a curious one — as he stares at Tommy. Tommy doesn't like it, but he doesn't move.

Why is he here? How long has he been here? There are bandages wrapped around his arms and legs, and a few drops of blood are staining through the white fabric. His feet ache, but they aren't on fire anymore. Does this Man know he can talk? He's not in pain either. Well, not in *nearly* as much pain as usual. His leg that he landed on wrong only aches now, and the holes in his shirt and shorts have even been stitched up. Is he taking him back to Dream? Tommy isn't going to let that happen. He would rather die. The last thing he remembers is running. Had Dream actually tried to shoot him? No, he wouldn't — he *couldn't*.

“So, uhh...” the Man drawls, “...I’m not very good at this, but if you have any questions feel free to ask.” Tommy most definitely isn’t going to ask. He can’t let this Man know he can talk. “I already know you can talk, by the way.” *Fuck—shit*—so much for that plan. Tommy sets a hand against the ground to steady himself. He really is ready to run, but the Man just *keeps talking*. “I found you passed out nearby, bleedin’ all over the place, so I figured I’d patch you up. I don’t know if you remember or not...” Tommy flinches as the Man moves his hand up, but all he does is scratch at the back of his neck. “...Anyway,” he says, and there’s a nervous laugh tied to the end of the word, “this is really awkward. Can you *please* just say somethin’?”

“What’d you do to me... bitch?”

The Man looks surprised for a second, but his expression quickly schools back to neutral again. “I already told you, I patched you up. Saved your life, actually.”

“So what? You want something from me now?” Tommy doesn’t expect the Man to be honest, but he asks anyway.

“No, nothin’. In fact, if you want to leave that’s fine, but I wouldn’t recommend it. Whoever was chasin’ you is still out there.” Tommy tenses further at the words. Dream is still out there.

“How— how long has it been? How far away are we?”

The Man stands. Tommy refuses to hiss at the action, because he can’t. He’s not a wild animal. Dream taught him that. He scrambles out of the sleeping bag and backs up a couple feet. The ache in his leg flares at the movement, and it must not be nearly as healed as he’d assumed. The Man raises his hands, and Tommy covers up his flinch this time. They hands don’t reach towards him though; instead they go up into the air, palms out.

“Relax. I’m just packin’ up my stuff. It’s been about a day since I found you, and I’d say we’re a few hours or so out. Personally, I’m hopin’ to keep that distance.” *A few hours*. Tommy has had more than a day’s head-start against Dream before and been caught. There’s no way he’ll ever make it with a few hours. He knows he’s going to try anyway.

Tommy watches the Man reach into one of his bags and pull out a can. It smells like corn. “Here,” he says not a moment later and stretches it out towards Tommy. There’s a good few feet of space between them, but Tommy has no intention of closing it. He doesn’t care if this Man really saved his life or not. He clearly has some ulterior motive for doing so. There’s no reason why he’d offer him his food either unless he’s trying to earn Tommy’s trust until he can hurt him. That’s always what Dream did.

“Fuck off,” Tommy snaps. “I don’t want your corn shit.”

The Man looks back down at the can and then back up. His eyebrow raises. “Okay, well if you change your mind it’ll be here.” Tommy watches in disbelief, but the Man doesn’t yell or move to attack him. He doesn’t even put the can away. He just sets it down on the ground in front of him and walks back over to his bag. Tommy just stands there as the Man continues to pack his supplies up, back turned toward him. Is he actually serious?

Tommy refuses to move.

He won't eat this Man's food.

His stomach gurgles traitorously, and he tries to remember the last time he ate.

He can't.

Tommy grits his teeth. He lunges forward and snatches the can away from its spot. As he retreats, his leg aches even more, and he expects the Man to attack him. He's ready for him to take back his word, to call Tommy *ungrateful for asking for so much* even after he went out of his way to save his life. None of that happens though. He runs far enough away — even further than before, but the Man *hasn't even looked back at him*.

He sniffs the can warily, but it doesn't smell any different. It still smells like corn. The label on the front reads Whole Kernel Corn. Yup, it's definitely corn. What about drugged corn? He checks the lid. It's air-tight. Guess that answers that.

Tommy looks at the Man again as he pulls the tab open, but he *still* doesn't look at him. He really must be giving it to him. Tommy knows there's a bad reason why, there always is, but he decides it's worth it this time.

He dumps the corn into his mouth and it's the greatest thing he's ever tasted. He knows it's just because he's starving, but right now he'd eat corn for the rest of his life if he could.

Tommy scarfs it down as he watches the Man sling a bag over his shoulder and walk towards his horse.

"You're the weirdest Last Man I've ever met," he comments with a mouth half-full of corn.

"I'm not a Last Man, kid." Tommy doesn't believe that for a second.

"I'm not a kid!"

"You look like a kid to me, and well, I don't exactly have a name to call you by, do I?"

"I'm not! And well— well you didn't ask!"

The Man turns his head and Tommy can see the ghost of a smile on his face. He doesn't know how to feel about it. It's *weird*. The Last Men don't smile, and when they do, it's never good. Not towards him. Smiles mean disappointment, anger, and pain. Never happiness.

"You're right. The name's Technoblade," the Man admits.

"Techno— *Technoblade*?"

Tommy doesn't know why he keeps trying to make this Man angry, but he can't help it. He waits for the moment he'll finally cross the line and Technoblade will snap. He *wants* to cross the line, so he can finally see the truth. He hates this game, but some part of him also eases at the way Technoblade just lets him insult him.

"What? Never heard of the great Technoblade before?"

“Course I haven’t! Who names their kid ‘ *Technoblade* ’? My name is much more normal and poggers!”

Technoblade huffs. “No idea what that means, but exactly what name would that be?”

Tommy stuffs his mouth with corn so he can stall for a few more seconds. He doesn’t think it would be the worst to give Technoblade his name, but he still hesitates. There’s a chance that he really isn’t a Last Man, but if he is, he just might not be one of Dream’s. He might have his own fucked up plans for Tommy, and he really doesn’t want to stick around to find out what those are.

“None of your business, bitch.”

“Alright, none of my business,” Technoblade *just accepts*, and Tommy honestly can’t figure out why. “What *is* my business though is whether or not you’re goin’ back out there. The Last Men won’t just give up, believe me, especially not on a hybrid like you. And well,” Technoblade says with another awkward laugh, “I’d rather you not get caught again.”

Tommy inhales the rest of the corn and throws the empty can onto the ground. “Why, you got some other plan for me?”

Technoblade walks over to the fire and kicks a few piles of dirt over it. His boots must have been black once, but their color has long faded to a dull gray. He might have even worn them since before the Great Crumble ever began. “Nah, kid. Would you believe me if I told you I really just don’t want them takin’ another hybrid?”

Tommy ignores the kid nickname this time, but he does snort. “It’s not like they’d kill me. I can talk, remember?”

Technoblade finally looks up at that, and his eyes trail over the bandages on Tommy’s arms and legs. They’re wrapped tight, but not tight enough to restrict his movement. For whatever reason, Technoblade seems to have really taken the time to “patch him up.” The bruises on Tommy’s arms still ache a bit, and his leg is probably sprained or something, but he’s not worried about that. It’s his scars. He has a lot of them. Tiny needle-point ones and ones cut long and precise — too many to have after just one escape from a couple of Last Men. How long does Technoblade think they had him?

Technoblade’s eyes flash with something, but the emotion is too fast for Tommy to pick up on before it’s gone. “Oh, right. You? Talking? How could I *possibly* forget?”

“Wait, what’s that supposed to mean?!—”

“—I’m serious, are you comin’ or not?” Tommy falls silent at the question, and he can’t help but glance around the campsite again. It’s empty. All the supplies previously strewn about are now stored on the saddle of Technoblade’s horse. Well, everything except the sleeping bag he was passed out in earlier and the fire — remnants that there was anyone even here to begin with.

“I don’t exactly have a choice,” Tommy states as he glares at the Man, because he doesn’t. It’s either stay behind and get caught by Dream, or get on the back of a horse with a strange Last Man who might not actually be a Last Man at all.

Technoblade shakes his head as he circles around to the other side of his horse. “You always have a choice. It’s just whether or not it’s the right one.” Tommy is about to reply that *that’s literally what he meant*, but suddenly there’s something in Technoblade’s hand. He brings it up to his face, and it takes Tommy a second to figure out what it is. It’s a helmet- no- a mask made out of bone. It’s the skull of an animal, and for all Tommy knows, it was some Pre-crumble one that no longer exists anymore. Sam never taught him about this one, but it has a long face and two tusks that jut from its mouth.

The skull settles onto Technoblade’s face like it was meant to be there all along, but it doesn’t cover the crown that sits on his head. A pair of eyes peer out at Tommy from the darkness of where the animal’s once were. He tries to stay calm. It’s not the skull that scares him, but the Man underneath it.

“Fine, I’ll go with you,” Tommy spits out, but he holds back the threat that lies on his tongue.

Technoblade nods. “Hand me that sleepin’ bag then,” he asks as he gestures towards it with one hand. Tommy doesn’t move for a few seconds before he reluctantly begins to shuffle over and snatches it up. He doesn’t especially want to be near Technoblade, but he supposes he also doesn’t have a choice about that either. He’s literally about to sit on the same horse as him.

Tommy’s hand shakes as he holds the sleeping bag out. He’s too close. Every part of him is poised to run again. Technoblade stares at him the entire time he approaches, but there’s nothing in his eyes that gives away any kind of intent. The Man raises his hand. It’s too slow, so slow that Tommy doesn’t flinch this time. It’s the way one might treat an injured, scared animal.

Technoblade’s fingers wrap around the navy fabric. He pulls the sleeping bag to his chest, and that’s it. Tommy breathes a little easier as the Man walks away, but he doesn’t go to his horse. He stops his boots on the ground a few feet away and leans over to pick up a can — the can Tommy threw on the ground, and *then* he goes back over to his horse. He packs the sleeping bag up and puts the can in one of the saddlebags. Why did he pick the can up at all? Is it to show Tommy he did something wrong? Is he going to bring it up later? Is he mad?

“Alright, let’s go,” Technoblade says as he puts his foot through the stirrup and swings his other leg over the horse. He looks down at Tommy and holds his hand out expectantly.

Tommy takes it, and he can only hope this is the right decision.



Tommy genuinely can't tell if Technoblade is serious or not. "Seriously?"

"I'm just sayin'," he says in the same deadpan tone, "Carl needs a break." Dream is chasing them and they have to stop, of all things, for a *horse*. Tommy would much rather continue running away, but he doesn't argue. He just grabs the back of Technoblade's cloak and waits until his horse named *Carl* blows out a rather sarcastic breath of air and comes to a halt.

"What kind of name is Carl anyway?"

"I'll have you know" — Technoblade says as he smoothly dismounts — "that Carl is a dignified and beautiful name." He places a hand on Carl's snout and looks at the horse. "Isn't that right, Carl?"

Tommy stares at Carl for a second. "Whatever. Your horse," he finally concludes. Technoblade turns his attention back to him at that, but he doesn't comment. He just walks over to Carl's side and slowly raises a hand up. Tommy doesn't take it. He swings his left leg over the other side of Carl and slips off with a sharp inhale. His butt aches and his leg burns even though he lands on his good one. Tommy refuses to complain. He doesn't think Technoblade would appreciate it, and he really doesn't want to give the Man a reason to change his mind and leave him behind.

Technoblade's silence doesn't make him want to run this time. He figured out a couple of hours ago that he just wasn't much of a talker. Either that, or he's really good at hiding his anger.

Tommy walks around Carl's butt so he can see what Technoblade is doing. The Man's mask is already set down on the ground at his feet. It's weird being able to see his face again — although most of it is turned away. The crown rests on his head still, and his hair is cut short and choppy, but Tommy really didn't hallucinate the color. It's still pink. He didn't know that people could be born with pink hair.

The Man reaches into a saddlebag and starts to pull stuff out. There's a can that smells like — a little like earth and a little like potatoes, and a red apple. Tommy inhales and looks away. If he doesn't look at the food, he tells himself he won't be as hungry. He also won't have to watch Technoblade eat it in front of him.

Wherever they are it's beautiful. Tommy is standing in the middle of a field of wild grass and white flowers. It smells like pollen and life, and the stalks tickle his arms when he moves around. There's a giant lake that looms in the distance, but for some reason, they aren't going towards it. He still doesn't know where Technoblade is going — where he's *taking* him. He doesn't even know where *here* is. He should probably ask.

"Where are we?"

He looks back right as Carl inhales the apple from Technoblade's palm. *What the fuck* — "Wyomin'," Technoblade replies.

Tommy composes himself, and he takes in the land around them again. It's unrecognizable. It's no longer home, and yet it's still so close to the cabin where he spent his entire life. To

Sam. His ears flatten at the thought. It's not like he can ever go back anyway, but it's sad, to think that he's so close and still so far away at the same time.

Tommy jerks his head back at Technoblade's sudden movement. "Here, kid," the Man says as he stretches out another can. It's the same thing that happened this morning, but this time the can smells like earthy potatoes instead of corn.

"What's the catch?"

"No catch, just food." Tommy scowls. He knows one can of corn isn't nearly enough to eat, but as much as he hates to admit it, he's scared. He's still scared of Technoblade and how easily he could hurt him.

Tense silence passes between them before Technoblade pops the lid open. Tommy growls at the taunt. He tries to cut the sound off once he remembers, but it's too late. *Dream*— Dream's not here, but if he were he would be so disappointed. He can practically hear the blow of words and rough fingers. He's not—he's *not* a wild animal and he *swears* he'll do better—*No*. No. Tommy clenches his eyes shut and breathes. He's not there anymore. Somehow, he actually *escaped*. It doesn't matter how much he'd disappoint Dream now. It's too late. He's as good as dead if he's ever caught again, and if Technoblade wants to waste food on him, he isn't going to say no.

Technoblade, thankfully, doesn't comment. He just lets him snatch the can, and this time Tommy is less surprised. He still sniffs it, but he saw the Man open it himself, and he didn't put anything in it. The front reads Whole New Potatoes. Why does everything say whole on it? Why does Technoblade have so many cans anyway? Tommy dumps a few of them into his mouth. The juice and potato bits taste less like potatoes than he thought they would, but he doesn't care. Now that there's *actually* food in his mouth, he realizes just how hungry he was again.

Technoblade pulls out what looks like a piece of bark from his bag. Tommy is about to ask if he's really gonna eat it, but then the Man *bites into it and tears a piece off*.

"Wha'ah *fuck*?" — he says as he swallows another potato bite — "What's that?"

"It's called 'beef jerky.'"

"Tha' Pre-crumble?"

"It is."

"Huh." Pre-crumble food. Sam told him it was difficult to find food like that now. Everyone wanted it but no one could manufacture it anymore, because all the facilities were forced to shut down. Sanitation issues or some shit like that. Tommy always liked Pre-crumble food. There was something mysterious about it. It came from a world Tommy never lived in. Most of the time though, all Sam and he ever ate was what they could grow or hunt.

He wonders how Technoblade got his hands on it, but he doesn't ask, and the two of them—the *three* of them, because Carl munches lazily on some grass nearby, fall silent.

The silence doesn't make Tommy feel nearly as uneasy this time. It's less awkward, less fearful, but still, there's an edge to it that arises between strangers. Between a hybrid and a human with a gun. Tommy takes another bite, and he wonders what Technoblade was doing out here, traveling by himself, completely alone with only a horse for company.

•=•=•

Technoblade finds them a spot to camp once the sun begins to dip past the horizon. It isn't near water this time, but they don't exactly have much of a choice but to take what they can get. It *is* pretty flat though, Tommy notes as he drops to the dirt. Everything aches now, and his butt hurts even worse. He doesn't understand horses. Carl is pretty and he likes to look at the rich brown of his coat, but that's it. Why would anyone want to ride a horse if *this* is what happens?

"Good job today, Carl," Technoblade whispers as he walks him over to a tree and ties a rope to it. Tommy stares at the strangely sweet interaction. He's never seen someone talk to a horse before. He's never seen anyone talk to *any* animal. At least, not like that. It just further convinces him that Technoblade is weird.

Technoblade begins to untie the packs too, and Tommy reluctantly pushes himself to his feet.

He has no idea what he's supposed to do, but he doesn't want to look useless. If he's useless, Technoblade might still leave him behind. "What—" he begins, but the Man turns around and the motion makes him hesitate, "...what do you want me to do?"

"Hmm," Technoblade thinks for a moment, "take this." He unties the navy sleeping bag and throws it over. Tommy catches it and bundles it up in his arms. "Put it wherever, and then... I'm assumin' you've made a fire before?" Tommy glares. What kind of question is that?

"Do that. I'll make dinner."

"Okay," Tommy replies as he walks a few feet away from Carl and throws the sleeping bag down. It doesn't really matter where, because he knows he'll just move it later. Technoblade might have given him food so far, but he doesn't trust him enough to sleep near him.

Tommy gets to work.

Sam taught him how to make a fire when he was four. He couldn't do it very well, but he did learn at least. First, you find rocks and dry material. Tommy scans the ground until he spots some and drifts over. He can still see Carl, but he's a ways away from their camp now. He's not so far, however, that he can't see how Technoblade has already taken his mask off and moved a bag or two off the saddle.

Tommy turns his attention back to the ground. Most of the stones he finds are really small, but there are a few decent-sized ones that he pulls into his arms. The sticks are next, but it

doesn't take him long to find those because they're literally everywhere. His arms ache once he finds enough material to start the fire, but he makes sure he doesn't drop anything as he carries them to the camp.

Technoblade is sat on the ground when he gets back. A bag rests by the Man's side, and it's open. The supplies found inside aren't strewn around on the ground but instead lie in front of Technoblade's boots. Tommy heaves the stones and sticks down with a breath. He's not nearly as panicked as the first time he saw Technoblade's stuff. There's the gun. A rifle. It's the same one he saw this morning. Technoblade doesn't make a move to hold it, but it is there. A water bottle that kind of reminds him of his canteen. He doesn't know what happened to it after Dream— There's also some kind of metal thing with a pot that must be used for cooking over a fire. Finally, there's an object Tommy doesn't recognize. It has a big red rectangular handle, and a black end that's long and thin. It reminds him of a gun, but it seems too small to be one.

Tommy gets back to doing what he was supposed to. The second step to build a fire is to clear an area of flammable material. Luckily for him, the ground is just dirt, so it's easy to place the stones in a circle and arrange the sticks in the middle of it. Tommy finishes his lopsided circle, and he looks over as Technoblade takes the red and black object into his hands and puts his finger around a trigger. It makes Tommy back away, and a jolt of fear burns through him.

Technoblade keeps his finger on the trigger, but he doesn't push it down immediately. "Never seen a lighter?"

"That's a lighter?" He barely even remembers what a normal one looks like. Sam used to have one when he was small, but he stopped using it for some reason. Tommy guesses it must have broke or something.

"Yup," Technoblade agrees, and that does make sense. Tommy wouldn't know if it was a lie or not, but he watches as Technoblade sets it down against the pile of wood and pulls the trigger. A spark ignites at the end and the wood sets ablaze a few seconds later. It really must be a lighter. Tommy continues to stand a few feet away, but he watches curiously now as Technoblade sets up the metal pot above the fire. The Man empties some water into the pot, throws in some carrots, and adds a few potatoes. "Sit down if you want. This is gonna take a while."

Tommy knows it's reckless, but he does what Technoblade says. He drops down near the other side of the fire and sighs when he feels the warmth. It begins to set into his skin. The nights aren't freezing this time of year, but the chill is enough to make him shiver even with his tail curled around himself. It's quiet as he watches the fire crackle. "Where exactly are we going?"

"Out of Wyomin'. To Colorado," Technoblade replies cryptically.

"Why?"

"Because it's not safe here." Fucking *duh*. "And because I saw the scars. I saw what they did to you. Nobody deserves that whether they're a hybrid or a Last Man or just a human bein'."

Tommy looks away and swallows. He tries not to think about what happened to him, but when he does the pain is always there — a permanent reminder beaten into his skin.

Technoblade's words are angry. Tommy knows they are, despite the usual monotonousness of them, but they are also unusually kind. The sudden emotion makes him want to cry.

Technoblade didn't tell him who he was or where he was going, but Tommy wonders now if it's just because he never asked.

Dream never would have said that to him, and he certainly never would have answered any of his questions.

Technoblade offers him the potato-carrot stew from the can he threw on the ground this morning, but Tommy doesn't overthink it. He just takes the food with the whisper of a thanks on his lips.

Tommy curls into his sleeping bag later that night.

He still moved it.

He still doesn't trust Technoblade, but it's the first time he believes that maybe he really isn't a Last Man.



It's his third night traveling with Technoblade when they see a house. The windows are boarded up and plants are growing out of cracks in the porch. Nature has taken it back already. Tommy eyes the roof warily. It's already tilted to one side — as if it could collapse at any moment and kill the both of them. That would be a weird way to die, but it wouldn't be the worst.

By the time they reach the front door, crickets have already started to chirp and night has officially set in. "Is this where you live?" Tommy asks suspiciously. He doesn't think there's any other reason to approach the place.

"I don't live anywhere," Technoblade says as he slows Carl to a stop by one of the porch posts. "But I do hide things where I can." He dismounts and reaches a hand up to Tommy. The movement pisses him off more than it comforts him now. It's slow. It's careful. Is Technoblade going to do it every time?

"...So you're like a squirrel?" Tommy's hand still shakes as he accepts the help. He presses his palm into Technoblade's, but the man- the *Man* pulls him gently down to the ground and lets go.

"Sure, like a squirrel," Technoblade agrees, but he doesn't seem mad. He just ties Carl to one of the posts — close enough to a patch of weeds — and begins to do what he does every time they stop. Tommy walks over to the porch, sets his bare feet on the wood, and watches

Technoblade unpack. The chill of the wood seeps into Tommy's feet and makes him shiver. He hopes he doesn't get a splinter. Splinters fucking suck.

Technoblade unties a bag off Carl's saddle and throws it over his shoulder. The navy sleeping bag is next, but Technoblade takes it into his hands and turns his attention on Tommy. He holds it out silently. Tommy sniffs as he stands there awkwardly, and the moment stretches between them. Technoblade doesn't move the sleeping bag. He stands still until Tommy finally approaches him and takes it into his hands. As he stares down at the fabric bundled in his arms now, Tommy notices, for the first time, that there's only one.

Technoblade's boots thump against the old porch wood before he stops at the front door. He twists the handle, and the door doesn't budge until he shoves it open with his shoulder. Tommy's ears twitch at the loud noise.

Technoblade doesn't say anything to him as he disappears into the house, but Tommy figures he wants him to follow. His foot raises over the doorway, but the moment it lands on the wood Tommy freezes. What is he *doing*? He looks at the inside of the house, and even though he hates the thought, even though it makes him sick, he still thinks it anyway. He could walk inside and never leave again. Technoblade could trap him in one of the rooms and—and—Tommy tries to breathe. Would the Man—*man*—would *Technoblade* really do that? It's been three days already and he hasn't hurt Tommy once. He hasn't yelled. He hasn't hit him. He never throws his gun over his shoulder and he never points it at him either. Technoblade is weird, and *kind*, and he always gives Tommy food—and he *gave him his only sleeping bag*.

Tommy inhales shakily. His eyes burn. Three days. It's been three days and some part of him already trusts Technoblade. He's so, so stupid, but he does, and the realization that he wants to *stay* is wonderful and horrible. If Technoblade takes it all back, even if he really is a wrongen and a liar, Tommy doesn't care anymore. Those moments of safety that he felt after so, so much fear and pain will have been worth it.

“You good out there, kid?” Technoblade yells from somewhere inside.

Tommy wipes an arm roughly across his eyes. “Just fine, Big Man!” he yells back as he steps into the house.

Technoblade offers him the couch in the living room that night—the only room without a door.



Tommy wakes up, and a sob crawls its way up to his throat. His chest hurts. He can't breathe. He sits on the floor, and it's cold just like *that place* always was. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry—” he gasps out, but another sob makes him choke. He doesn't know why he's sorry, but he really, *really* is. He wants to be *good*.

Dream walks into the room. His footsteps make Tommy flinch, but he knows there's nowhere to go. He curls up, arms held over his head even though he knows whatever is going to happen will still hurt. He feels blood on his teeth and needles that burn through his legs. He can hear Dream's words as he speaks to Bad — words that twist with some kind of hope.

One little hybrid for the whole of humanity.

Something heavy and warm falls over Tommy, and the feeling crashes against his waves of panic. It's a cloak—*Dream's* cloak, and he's doing it again. He's acting nice *again*. Tommy can't hold back another sob. It's a lie, it has to be a lie—

“—You're gonna be okay,” Dream soothes, and the fact that the words are comforting makes Tommy shake harder. He knows it's a lie— “It's okay—”

“—Please,” Tommy gasps out. “Please Dream. I'll do better— I'll—”

“Dream...?” Dream whispers, but it's low and confusing now. Tommy doesn't understand why. “I'm not Dream, kid,” the voice states, and it suddenly sounds *nothing* like Dream at all. He suddenly doesn't *know where he is anymore*.

Tommy opens his eyes and it's— it really isn't Dream. It's *Technoblade*. He's sitting a few feet from Tommy, and his arms rest open and visible in his lap. “Tech?” Tommy asks, and now he's the one that doesn't sound like himself. His voice breaks on the word, and he feels like he's going to break with it.

“That's right. Can I touch your arm?” Tommy sobs again. He's so, so scared. He doesn't want to move, but he lowers one of his arms anyway and squeezes his eyes shut again. He still can't breathe. He still doesn't know where he is, but he knows Techno is here with him.

Techno's hand brushes against his arm, but he doesn't tighten his fingers around it. He leaves no bruises or marks as he guides Tommy's hand forward until it presses against his chest. The beat of something steady and alive floods into Tommy. A heartbeat. “Breathe with me in one...” Techno says, and his palm stays on the back of Tommy's hand.

Tommy shudders, but he takes in a shallow gasp. “Two...” and another. “Three...” Another. Techno continues to count with him, but it feels impossible. It feels like forever until he breathes in and the air flows through his chest like it's supposed to, but eventually, inevitably, it does.

Tommy uncurls his other arm and looks up at Techno. The man's movements are slow, but he can tell it's not entirely for his sake anymore. There's exhaustion weighing him down, and it feels like he's sinking into the ground. Techno begins to move his hand off of his, but the loss makes Tommy panic again. He whines and grips onto Techno's shirt. Techno steadies himself at the contact, but he doesn't pull away. “Do you know where you are?” is all he asks.

Tommy breathes. He does. He's not at *that place* anymore. He's not trapped in a room. He's not with *Dream*. “Travelin'...” he whispers, "...with you.” It's the fifth night since he met Techno, and they're camped under the stars again. A fire burns dimly a few feet away, and the wind is alive.

“Travelin’,” Techno echoes, and in that moment, Tommy knows he made the right decision.

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Tommy wakes up. The fire is burnt out beside him, and the early morning darkness that precedes dawn burns his eyes. He closes them, but for some reason, the burn doesn’t go away. He tries not to think about why and fails miserably. The last time he had a nightmare was—it had to have been *before*. He doesn’t know why they stopped. Maybe it was because he was too tired to have any, or maybe he was already living in one every single day he woke up still alive. The fact that he had one at all means something Tommy doesn’t quite know how to put together.

He forces his eyes open again and searches for Techno. The man is rolled onto his side a few feet away, cloak curled around him in what is clearly some attempt to preserve his warmth. Tommy wiggles out of his sleeping bag and pushes himself into a sitting position. He doesn’t remember crawling back into it. He doesn’t think he ever did. The last thing he remembers is the opposite: how he clung to Techno until he felt exhaustion pour through every vein. He even called him ‘Tech.’ *In front of him.* God, that’s embarrassing.

Tommy breathes out sharply. His body aches still, but at least his leg is doing better. He doesn’t want to get up. The more he thinks about sleep though, the more he thinks about last night. He doesn’t want to think about last night, so he awkwardly pulls himself up and bundles his sleeping bag into his arms. The air is cool, but not enough for him to see his own breath. Techno is still asleep by his side of the fire. Tommy starts to walk towards him anyway. He’s only a foot or so away when Techno rolls over and looks up. His tired eyes meet Tommy’s, and it makes him think of last night *again*. Techno is weird. He’s kind. Tommy knows what he wants to do now.

He clears his throat, and his eyes dip away for a moment. “Tommy,” he states as he looks at the ground.

“Tommy?” Techno repeats in a low tone, but he can’t quite hide the grogginess that seeps into it.

“Yup,” Tommy says as he looks back at Techno again. The man’s jeweled crown is falling off his head. He never takes the time to take it off before he sleeps. Underneath it, his hair is the same kind of messy it always is in the morning, but its pink tone has faded slightly. There’s a darkness in it now. “Why’s your hair pink anyway?”

Techno squints his eyes. “*Heh? Because I dye it?*” Tommy scowls. Die? “It means I make it pink on purpose,” Techno clarifies, and that makes a lot more sense than whatever Tommy was thinking.

“Yeah,” he scoffs, “*I knew that.* I was just wondering why.”

Techno shrugs. “I like—” he begins, but Tommy drops the sleeping bag over him and his words cut off. Techno glances down at it, and he places one hand over the navy fabric. “—I like the color.”

“Course you do,” Tommy says, and not a moment later he turns and starts to walk away.

“Where are you goin’, Tommy?” Techno asks, and it almost makes him stop. The way Techno says his name feels right. It’s not like Dream. It’s not — as much as he hates it, it’s not like Sam either. He isn’t controlled by it, or scared, or sad, or distressed. It’s just his name.

“For a walk,” Tommy replies, but then he realizes how it sounds and really does stop. He doesn’t want Techno to think he’s running off. “But I’ll be back soon.”

“Okay,” Techno just grunts out, seemingly unconcerned, and from the sound of it, he shuffles the sleeping bag over himself.

Tommy smiles, but luckily his back is turned so Techno doesn’t see it. A yawn escapes from him as he wipes the sleep out of his eyes. They’re less than a day now from the Wyoming-Colorado border, but even if Techno didn’t tell him, Tommy would be able to tell by the way the landscape has changed. There’s barely any trees now, or water, or animals other than ones that fly or scurry across the ground. Instead, he’s surrounded by wide-open prairie and outcrops of earthen-colored hills. An old Pre-crumble road guides them towards Colorado, but Techno is smart enough not to travel on it. Bad things happen when you do.

Tommy kicks a stray rock with his bare foot, because he *still doesn’t have shoes*, and breathes in a lungful of air. It smells like dry earth and old animal blood. There’s still no sign of life in this vast prairie land. Now that Tommy thinks about it, it’s almost unnerving how they haven’t seen another person so far. It’s been... what? — almost an entire week, and the only signs that Techno and he aren’t the last people on earth have been footprints and abandoned fires. It’s weird. It’s more luck than Tommy ever thought he’d get, but he’ll gladly take it. Dream is still chasing them. He has to be. There’s no way he just *gave up*. Tommy doesn’t mention how the thought always sits in the back of his mind though. Techno probably already knows.

There’s a fence-post a little ways away that Tommy spots, and he heads over to it. The wood is cracked, left abandoned long enough for it to deteriorate. He puts a hand on it anyway. The bandage on his right arm flies with the wind, but he ignores it. Tommy wonders what the fences out here used to be used for. In a different world. In a different time.

Tommy doesn’t know how long he stands by the post. His ears twitch, but all he can hear is the wind and the rustle of dry leaves. He breathes in the cool air and smells what he would have said was a Last Man but is only Techno. His fingers won’t sit still as they continue to mess with the hem of his shirt. It’s only until Tommy starts to feel exposed that he heads back to safety — to Techno.

He scans their camp, hidden in the fold of a hill, which is about the only place out here one can hide. Nothing is out of the ordinary other than the fact that Techno is up and tying his bag. Tommy makes his way back, and once he’s close enough, he realizes his sleeping bag is

already on Carl's saddle. How long was he gone? Five minutes? Fifty? He doesn't know. Techno turns around at the sound of his approach, but the man's face is neutral, posture relaxed. "Hullo," he greets with a nod.

It makes Tommy's steps halt. "Sorry," he says, and as soon as he does, he wishes he could take the word back. A few days ago he would have said it and felt right, but now it couldn't feel more wrong. He hates the word. He *knows* that Techno isn't going to hurt him. After last night, he knows, but a part of him still argues. It doesn't mean that Techno can't be mad, or angry, or disappointed. He's only human. It'll happen eventually. Carl nickers a few feet away, impatient and ready to go already. It doesn't mean Tommy can't mess up. He's good at messing up. That's why Dream—

"—Hey, Tommy, look at me?" Techno asks as he sets his bag on the ground, and Tommy didn't even realize he was somewhere else entirely for a moment. Techno's question echoes in his mind, and he lifts his head up. The man's eyes look like they did last night, upturned with alertness, blank with emotion in a way that only makes sense with Techno. "What're you sorry for?"

"Because I—" Tommy hesitates, but Techno's silence makes him continue, "—I didn't help pack up." Maybe it's only half the reason why, but Tommy doesn't particularly want to talk about last night.

"It's fine. I'm used to doin' it myself. There is somethin', though, that I would like you to do," he states.

Tommy reins in his thoughts full of fear and pain. "What, bitch?" he forces out, but there's no bite behind it this time.

"Let me fix your bandages."

Tommy doesn't say '*That's it?*' like he might have before. He doesn't try to find the lie, because there isn't one. Techno is right. The bandages on his arms and legs fall loose now, and with every little movement they twist and come further undone. Tommy knows they're probably super gross and dirty by now too — no longer pristine white, but a dirty, rusty brown. Part of him still doesn't want to say yes. Techno didn't offer until now so he never asked. He was afraid it would somehow be too much, that he would ask for too much. He doesn't want to cross the line anymore. He wants Techno to keep being nice.

"Okay," Tommy breathes out anyway as he shakily lowers himself to the ground.

"Thank you," Techno says as if *he*'s the one being patched up, as if Tommy is doing him a favor and not the other way around. His hands stay in view as he takes a little square first aid kit out of his bag, and his boots rustle against the grass until he's a foot or so away. The man lets out a huff of air as he sits down and crosses his feet under him. Tommy snorts.

"What?" Techno asks as he sets the kit down between them and unlatches it. Tommy looks at the supplies inside: bandages, tape, a pair of scissors, and — that's it. There's barely anything in it. It's almost completely empty now, but Tommy wonders if not so long ago, it wasn't.

“Nothing...” Tommy trails off. “Was just thinking about how old you sound.”

“*Old?!*” Techno stresses and his voice shifts higher in protest. “I’m only thirty-three! If I’m old, then you’re a baby!”

A very undignified, but angry chitter passes through Tommy’s throat. “What the hell! I’m not a *baby*! I’m a *Big Man*!”

“Really? How old are you even? *Twelve?*”

“*Twelve?!*” Tommy screams, “I’m—!” he starts to say, but he cuts himself off at Techno’s short, gasping laughs. Something rises in Tommy’s at the sound, and no matter how much he fights it back, it still comes. A bright burning feeling explodes in his chest, and he can’t stop himself from smiling. When Techno reaches out towards the bandages, Tommy lets him unwind them with a slow, fragile touch.

Chapter End Notes

CW: past abuse, fear of abuse, implied experimentation (mentions of needles), brief description of leg injury

Technoblade has arrived! It's interesting how much Tommy does/doesn't know being raised in a forest with Sam as his only connection to modern human things. His knowledge is kind of jumbled.

I hope you enjoyed chapter 2! Please feel free to leave a comment (even just a POG)!

Next week's chapter may or may not release a little later than usual (because I won't be home), but it'll be out a day late at the most. See you guys then :)

sometimes it's okay to bend the truth, if it helps someone you love

Chapter Notes

Hi! I wish I could've put this one out yesterday, but I was way too busy and trying to upload from my phone wasn't working. I'm finally back home now though, so here it is! It's a big one!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Seven days and a few minutes later, they officially cross over from Wyoming into Colorado. The border sign is barely a dot in the distance once they do spot it, but as much as Tommy wants to go look, he knows it's safer not to. Techno doesn't even mention the sign.

The sun is sinking by the time Techno stops them. "Horse tracks," he says instead, and Tommy scans the ground. His gut sinks at the sight, and he grips tighter onto the back of Techno's cloak. At least a dozen or so tracks are imprinted into the dirt ahead of them.

"They might be old," Techno states, but he still dismounts. He pulls his mask up over his head and hangs it on one of the knobs on Carl's saddle. Tommy watches him walk over to one of the prints and trail his finger across the edge of it. A moment passes before the man looks back up, and there's an edge set into his eyes. "Nevermind. They're fresh. The group might be just ahead of us." The group. Of course it's a *group*. There are way too many prints for it to be one human. Tommy swallows. Where there's a group, there's always Last Men. Who else would be out here traveling the roads? Roads are for humans. He smells the air, but nothing enters his nose except Techno and nature. There's no scent of Last Men that streams ahead of them, of *anyone* ahead of them, and Tommy doesn't understand. It doesn't make sense.

He slides off of Carl as fast as he can and walks over to Techno. "What do we do?" he asks, and his voice is a harsh whisper as it leaves. He can't help the fear that leaks into it. It's been so quiet this past week. Too quiet. Techno made sure to cover their tracks, only burned fires when necessary, and picked up all the shit Tommy threw on the ground like an idiot. He's been smart, but a part of Tommy knew—a part of him *knows*, that it's only a matter of time before they run into something or someone out here.

"We have to keep movin'. I was able to throw off whoever is behind us, but if we stop, we'll get caught for sure," Techno admits. It's the last thing Tommy wants to hear, but it's the truth. He opens his mouth to respond, but a growl shatters the air.

Tommy can feel the pressure of the bullet as it hits his ears, but he doesn't try to block it out. His first instinct instead is to duck, and he does. He curls up as small as he can on the dusty ground, and when he looks back up, he sees Techno shoot forward. He doesn't hesitate to grab onto Carl's rein despite the attack. The horse squeals in panic as he twists and bucks in

an attempt to flee, but Techno tries his best to pull back. Carl's feet pound against the ground, and he breathes hard, once, twice... and that's when Tommy sees them.

“Techno!” he screams, but it’s too late. The Last Men emerge from above and below. There are three in total, clothed in neutral colors, clothes frayed and torn, stitched and re-stiched together. Each one has a gun in their hands. Tommy freezes where he lies because one of the guns is aimed at him. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Techno lunge for his own.

“Don’t move!” one of the other Men yells when he sees the movement, and he aims his gun at Techno. Tommy’s breath cuts off, but no trigger is pulled. Techno stops, and slowly, reluctantly, he raises his hands up into the air. The third and remaining Man starts to approach Carl, weapon held loose in his hands.

“Would you look at that,” the Man near Tommy says as he shifts closer. “You found yourself quite the hybrid. I ain’t never seen a raccoon.” He gazes into the Man’s eyes, and the look in them makes Tommy shake harder. It’s hungry and desperate. He doesn’t doubt the Man would shoot him right now if he weren’t so valuable, but as much as that thought makes Tommy want to run away, he can’t. A gun is still aimed at him. A gun is aimed at Techno. The Man continues to shift closer, and closer, until he’s suddenly within arms reach and not again, *not again*. Tommy curls his tail close to his body and growls. The sound makes him flinch back, but he doesn’t care anymore. He doesn’t *care*. He’s never letting another Last Man near him again.

“— Wait!” the Man circling Carl interrupts, and Tommy jerks his head. It takes him a moment to figure out what the Man is looking at, and then it clicks. “I know that mask,” the Man states, but his voice no longer holds any confidence. There’s something else to it — a hint of hesitation and fear. “It’s the Blood God’s. That’s the Blood God!” Techno’s eyes widen at the name.

The Man holding a gun to Techno’s head drops it like it’s suddenly on fire. “We didn’t know!” he gasps out, and the words make Tommy’s brain fog over. He can hardly think past the panic that floods through him. Blood God. *Blood God*. The name rattles around in his head, but he’s never heard it before. What does it mean? Why are the Men so afraid?

“We’ll leave you alone,” they say.

“If we knew earlier, we wouldn’t have even approached,” they continue.

The Men back away from Techno, but their eyes flit from the ground to Tommy and then back to Techno. Tommy can’t even speak before the air shatters *again*. His ears trace the direction to the left this time. It’s not a growl. It’s almost like — like a — something hits one of the Men and he screams. His body thuds against the ground, and Tommy’s heart leaps into his throat at the long, sleek arrow imbedded into his chest. The Man doesn’t move again, dead the second it hit him.

The other Men aim their guns into the grass, up into the small hills, and begin to shoot wildly. Tommy’s ears flatten at the growls, and he curls his hands around them. It doesn’t stop the sting. “Kid,” someone whispers near him, and Tommy looks up.

“Techno,” he whines, and the man helps pull him to his feet. Tommy presses closer to him as the Men’s bullets finally begin to slow. Their eyes are wide, fingers shaky as they keep them aimed high, but no arrow shoots from out of the grass again.

“I can’t see them,” one of them whispers.

Tommy can.

He sees the moment a figure, a human wrapped in black and green feathers runs out from the grass. Their face is hooded as they rush one of the Men, but when they face forward, a mask with a long, black beak sits just below their eyes. They shove a sword into the nearest Man, and he falls back with a wounded, ugly cry. The last Man left raises his gun, ready to shoot the bird-human, but he’s pushed down as two knives are shoved into his back by a second figure.

Tommy never saw the second figure — covered in brown feathers as he stands above the Man. A feathered hood covers his head with little ears on the top, and his face is painted in swirls of black and white. “Contained! Move in Crow!” he yells, and one last figure — *Crow*, comes out from the grass.

Tommy presses himself against Techno’s leg as he stares at Crow. He too is adorned in feathers, but they are a silky black rather than brown or green, and go all the way down his arms and up across his back. He has no hood or face-paint, but a green hat that dips just below his forehead, and an even greener shirt that lies underneath his cloak. He can see black pants underneath his cloak that end in a pair of boots.

These aren’t Last Men, but they aren’t hybrids, faces clear of any animal traits.

Suddenly the second figure, the one who yelled a second ago, turns and stares right at Tommy. “My name is Owl,” he says, and his voice is bold, but not unkind either. It confuses Tommy even more. “We’re not going to hurt you. We’re here to set you free.” He gestures towards Crow and the man raises his bow up. Tommy tenses, but the arrow isn’t aimed at him. It’s aimed at Techno.

“Step away from him!” Crow orders. Techno doesn’t respond as he raises his hands up and stays still.

“It’s okay,” Owl continues, and Tommy’s head spins as he tries to figure out what’s going on. “We’re giving you your freedom back. You can go wherever you want, just make it far away from *him*. Do you have a name?” Tommy’s eyes widen, and Owl’s face softens, as if he thinks the look is of relief and not fear.

“What do you mean?” Tommy manages to ask, but the surprise on the human’s faces makes him freeze.

“He can talk,” Crow says, but the words are too high, too unsure to be a statement. He lowers his bow an inch or two.

The first figure takes off their beak to reveal the face of a young man. “Yeah,” he agrees, “and he isn’t running away either.”

“Clearly —” Owl states as he glares at the first-figure, “ — he’s not like all the other hybrids, Duck. He’s like Tubbo.” Tubbo? What does that mean? Why are these humans named after birds? Who *are* they? “Anyway...” Owl begins but then falters when he looks at Techno, “...why is he still alive?” Tommy looks between the three figures: Owl, Duck, and Crow, and then back to Techno. The man stares at Owl, but his expression is unreadable.

“I thought you always needed to give the command,” Duck replies, but there’s a sharpness underneath his words that surprises Tommy. Isn’t Owl supposed to be his leader?

Owl’s gaze is blank, and then it’s quiet for a few tense seconds. “Shoot him,” he orders, and Tommy’s veins fill with ice. They’re going to shoot Techno. They’re going to *kill him*.

“No — don’t!” Tommy manages to gasp out, and he runs in front of the bow and buries himself into Techno’s chest. He can feel the way Techno tenses up at the contact, but he doesn’t push Tommy away.

Tommy turns his head and stares into Owl’s eyes, but he doesn’t see anger. He sees confusion. Crow keeps his bow aimed at them, but he shuffles on his feet and waits. Duck is silent.

“He’s a Last Man,” Owl tries to reason, “the same Men who just tried to capture you. There’s only one reason he’d keep you around, and it’s *not* to be friends.”

“Shut up! He’s not a Last Man!” Tommy argues, but it comes out shaky. Tommy stares up at Techno’s face. It’s still blank, and he doesn’t meet Tommy’s eyes.

“Is that what he told you? He’s the *Blood God*!” Owl exclaims, and he spits the name out like it’s a curse. “You saw how those other Men acted. The Blood God has killed hundreds of hybrids, turned them in to be sold like product and — and they *worship* him for it.” The realization hits Tommy like a bullet, and it shoots through his entire body. It hurts worse than any kind of pain. It hurts him almost as much as the day Sam died. There’s a crack in Techno’s face at that word: *worship*.

Tommy shoves himself away from the man—*Man. Techno*. “Techno?” he begs, and it’s barely a whisper. He wants Techno to deny it all. He wants it worse than anything he’s ever wanted before, because it can’t be true. *It can’t be true*.

“I did what I had to do to survive. I’m sorry, Tommy,” is all Techno says, and the words aren’t evil, or proud, or guilty.

“‘I’m sorry’,” Owl mocks. “I hope you rot in hell.”

“Can we hurry this up? We’ve been here too long,” Duck stresses.

Owl gestures to Crow again, and the man notches back his arrow.

Tommy can't breathe. He feels like he's stuck in another nightmare. He feels like he's dying. This can't be *real*. Techno is weird, and good, and kind. He *can't* be like Dream. No matter how much Tommy wants to deny it though the proof is there, and it flashes through his mind.

The crown: a symbol of a God.

The dyed hair.

The Pre-crumble food.

The reason Techno never leaned into his touch.

The fact that they never ran into anyone else.

It makes Tommy feel smaller than he's ever felt before. His eyes burn as he cries and shakes and feels his world fall apart for the third and last time. He gave Techno — *Technoblade* — *everything*. His heart. His life. His *trust* after Dream broke him, and used him, and hurt him over and over again. Tommy looks back up at the Man one last time. He's fallen to his knees now, and his eyes are closed tight. He doesn't try to lie his way out. He doesn't try to escape. He looks like he's in *pain*, and that's what makes Tommy break.

“Get back, kid,” Crow says as he aims his arrow at Technoblade's chest, but Tommy doesn't hear him. He can't hear anything past Technoblade's words, words that fight against everything he's just been told.

I'm not a Last Man, kid.

You always have a choice. It's just whether or not it's the right one.

No catch, just food.

Nobody deserves that whether they're a hybrid or a Last Man or just a human being.

I don't live anywhere.

I'm not Dream, kid.

Something in Tommy reforms. He takes a step forward, and another, and another, until he's standing just out of reach of Technoblade. The Man opens his eyes at the footsteps. He looks up, but once he realizes it's Tommy, he bows his head in silence. Technoblade *betrayed* him. He lied about everything: about being a Last Man, about his promises of safety. Tommy is so, so stupid though, and he always has been. He's loyal, and he clings to people who hurt him because more than anything he doesn't want to be alone.

“What are you doing?” Owl asks warily, and that's when Tommy looks back at the human. He shifts until his back is facing Technoblade — no matter how unsafe it makes him feel — and he opens his arms wide to cover the Man from their view.

“Fuck you! You can’t kill him!” Tommy yells. His words flow breathy, but hard. For good measure, he adds, “If you kill him, I’ll run.”

“What? Why are you *defending* him?” Owl says with wide, wary eyes. Crow lowers his bow to the ground. Duck just stares.

“Tommy, you heard what he said,” Technoblade whispers behind him as if he needs *to be reminded*. Tommy knows. He *knows*.

“You can’t kill him,” is all that comes out of his mouth again. *You can’t kill him, you can’t kill him.*

Owl flicks his hand back, and Crow disarms his bow completely. He stares at Tommy again, and he has a feeling the human is seeing him for what he truly is this time. He’s more than just a scared little hybrid looking for shelter. Tommy holds his ground, and it feels like forever until Owl finally speaks.

“Take him,” he orders, and Tommy feels like he can breathe again.

“Take him? *Him*?” Duck repeats. “We’ve never spared anybody before, let alone the *Blood God*.”

“And when’s the last time we rescued a talking hybrid?” Owl says with a scoff. “Delta procedures. River route,” he continues to say, and then he sheathes his daggers back into his belt. Tommy doesn’t know what the words mean, but they are obviously more orders.

Duck shoves his sword into a sheathe, a sour expression on his face, but he appears to listen as he walks over to Carl. The horse eyes him warily, but Duck slowly places a hand on his snout and says something soft that Tommy can’t quite hear. He hopes Carl will be treated well by these humans. He’s a good horse, and he hasn’t done anything wrong.

At the same time that Duck moves, Crow nods and starts to take out some rope and a black stick. He readjusts both in his hand as he walks over to Technoblade. Tommy backs away from Crow, but he watches intently as he pulls Technoblade to his feet and begins to tie his hands up. Technoblade doesn’t try to struggle. He just turns his gaze towards Tommy and opens his mouth, intent to say something more. Tommy doesn’t want to hear it, he *doesn’t* — Crow shoves the stick into Technoblade’s side and a fizzler erupts from it. The Man grunts in pain, and Tommy realizes that whatever the stick is, it must be a weapon.

Tommy thought he’d feel something — something *more* than he does, but a cold numbness settles over him as he avoids Technoblade’s eyes. He doesn’t look back as he approaches Owl, posture small as he stays just out of arms reach. He gets a reassuring smile from the human, but it doesn’t help.

“Where are we going?” Tommy asks, but he follows Owl anyway as the human begins to hike back up one of the hills.

“To our hideout,” Owl answers easily, and that makes sense. Tommy can’t bring himself to care if any of it’s a lie anymore, but he *is* curious still.

“Who are you guys anyway? Why were you out here?” he continues to question as he steps over a rock and uses his hands to propel himself up the hill. Technoblade’s familiar footsteps pace a few feet behind them, and Tommy’s ears twitch at their once comforting rhythm. Now, they sound no different than the steps of the Men who tried to hurt him earlier.

Owl glances behind them for a moment before he turns his head forward again. “We were following a group of Last Men, but then we saw you and the Blood God and got side-tracked. I’ll explain everything soon. All I can say right now is that we’re called the Animal Army. Our mission is to defend hybrids from harm: whatever we have to do, and whatever the cost,” Owl explains, and there’s a genuineness in his voice. Tommy doesn’t know what to say. He thought the Last Men were the only humans left. Sam — Tommy was never told about any other groups, about people who want to save hybrids rather than kill them. Why would they save Tommy anyway? Don’t they fear hybrids? Don’t they think he caused the Sick?

It’s silent for a few seconds before Owl speaks again. “Your name’s Tommy, right?” Tommy doesn’t respond. He just scowls at Owl who at least manages to look a little sheepish. It’s not as if Tommy told him, but he doesn’t think it matters whether the human knows or not. None of it matters because he’s hurt over and over again anyway. Tommy meets Owl’s eyes once more — a dark brown color that reminds him of mud and the rocks where he grew up. “I’m Owl,” he repeats, “but that’s just a nickname. You can call me Wilbur.”

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Night falls and crickets drone loud and steady in Tommy’s ears. He wonders if Wilbur is going to make them walk all night. He really hopes not, because his feet hurt like a bitch, and he *still doesn’t have shoes*. Right as he’s about to ask though, Tommy sees a light flash through the trees ahead. It’s distant, but he continues to walk behind Wilbur and they break past the treeline. The light spreads out over a huge, circular building, with long wooden support beams. There’s another structure behind the main building, long and tinged pink as it wraps around itself and curls up into the sky. Tommy has no idea what it is, but it looks like a really dangerous road. Wilbur stops ahead of him, and for a few seconds, Tommy takes in everything. “What is this place?” he asks, and there’s a wonder that leaks into his voice.

Wilbur’s eyes glint in the darkness. “This is our home,” he states with a smile, and they keep walking towards the front entrance of the Animal Army’s hideout. If it weren’t for his eyes, Tommy wouldn’t have been able to see four armed figures stood at the top of the building. They remind him of that Last Man whose face was covered with circles: George — the one Dream lied to when they first got to *that place*. He wonders if any of the Last Men there found out what was really going on, or if Dream lied to them as much as he lied to Tommy.

As they walk further down the path, Tommy’s thoughts are cut off by the sight of a head sticking up from the ground. It has a giant, open jaw, with teeth the size of his arm, and two eyes painted on the side of it. Wilbur walks a little further ahead and steps through the jaw. He emerges on the other side and motions for Tommy to follow. Tommy does, a little more hesitation to his steps, but once he peers inside he’s overcome with more curiosity than fear.

He walks through the creature's jaw, and as he trails his hand through the cracked, stony underside of it, Tommy wonders if it was Pre-crumble. Did this thing walk the Earth before he was born, or is it fake — something completely made up by the humans that once lived here? He doesn't ask.

Wilbur takes him to the end of the path, and it diverges into an array of even more confusing paths that must lead to different areas of the hideout. Tommy spots a figure stood above them on a balcony lined with a wooden fence, and they look down. Their head is covered by a white fur hood with two little ears at the top, but the ears are different from Wilbur's. Tommy can't see their eyes because there's shades over them, but they wear a brown jacket with white fur-lined at the collar. He remembers seeing shades for the first time when he was small — a black and red pair sat on an old dresser. The figure waves down at them, and if the human is surprised by Tommy, they don't make it known. Wilbur just waves back, and then turns to Tommy again expectantly. "Follow me. I want to show you something," he states. Tommy starts to nod, but then he glances back and pauses.

Duck stands a few feet away, but as he comes up to the figure he waves and then motions towards the left. Carl's hooves clop behind him, but he doesn't seem upset to be led by the human to wherever they're going. Crow is further back. He still has his weapon held to Technoblade's back, but he also takes the time to wave up at the figure. Tommy wonders who they are.

He's about to turn back to Wilbur, but then he sees Technoblade. The Man pays no attention to anyone. His gaze is entirely on Carl as the horse is lead away. "Where are you takin' Carl?" he asks, but the anger that bleeds into his tone surprises Tommy. The voice in the back of his head reminds him that he never really knew Technoblade at all. Crow shoves his stick into the Man's back and he falls to his knees with another pained grunt.

"The only one you should be worrying about right now is yourself," Crow says, and his voice is like ice. The coldness in it makes Tommy shiver, and not a second later he feels something press down on his shoulder. The touch makes his ears press to his head, and he flinches away before he can even process that it was a hand. *Wilbur's hand.*

"Sorry," Wilbur says, and he wrenches his hand back to his side. He certainly *seems* like he is, but it doesn't matter. He'll hurt Tommy soon enough, or he'll just leave him alone. "I should've..." he continues, but then his words fade off. Should've what- *known*?

Tommy rolls his eyes. "Let's just go," he states. The last thing he wants to feel is pitied. Wilbur stares at him for a moment longer, but then he begins to walk down one of the pathways. Tommy follows, but this time he makes sure to keep himself out of arms reach again. The only reason he wasn't before was because he got distracted.

The hallway Wilbur enters starts to dim, and then he opens a door at the end and walks through. Tommy walks in after him and colors burst in his vision. There's a cold, metal-grated floor lined with every color Tommy can think of. They continue to walk through the hallway, and he looks down at the lights as they shift in sync with his footsteps. The walls that surround them are lined with drawings and phrases — highlighted in reds, greens, yellows, and pinks. Tommy looks closer at them, and he realizes each one is a different animal. Some of the names are familiar: DUCK, CROW. Most of them aren't: CAT, BEE,

GOAT, RAM, FOX, SHARK, GIRAFFE, ELEPHANT... He doesn't read all of them before Wilbur's voice breaks the silence.

"Every time someone gets initiated into the Animal Army..." Wilbur begins. "...they paint their favorite animal." The human's eyes scan the walls, and Tommy finds the one Wilbur eventually stops his gaze on. In the distance, Tommy can faintly hear the sound of music and voices, and they must be from the names of the humans on these walls. Wilbur's name makes a lot more sense now.

"That one's yours," he states. OWL is painted on the wall in a soft blue color, and like all the others, there's a scribbly drawing of an owl underneath it. Tommy may not know every animal on the wall, but he does know what an owl is. He used to hear them when he was younger, and he even saw a few in the trees late at night. They are silent and beautiful. Anytime he found a stray wing on the ground, he'd excitedly take it to — Tommy's heart aches.

"Yeah," Wilbur agrees softly.

Tommy keeps looking at the wall. OWL is the only name on this one, but the rest of them are filled up. "Why aren't there anymore after it?"

"I was the very first member of the Animal Army, because I created it," Wilbur explains, and he smiles proudly. Tommy was right. Wilbur is the leader, and the title makes him remember George's voice, and the Last Men who couldn't meet Technoblade's eyes, and then he thinks of Duck. He listened to Wilbur, but he didn't act like he wanted to. There was a challenge in his voice — a sudden sharpness when he spoke. Do they really listen to Wilbur, or do they just act like it?

"Where did you take Technoblade? Are you still going to kill him?" Tommy suddenly questions.

Wilbur stares for a moment, and then he frowns. "No one does anything here without my permission. The Blood God will be held in a secure room, and he won't be killed — not unless I want him to be," he finally concludes. Tommy doesn't entirely believe Wilbur, but there's nothing he can do anyway. He just nods, and it's silent for a moment before Wilbur speaks up again. "Can I ask you something?" Tommy looks at the animals painted onto the walls, and then he nods.

"Who is the Blood God to you?" Tommy's eyes freeze on one of the animals: FERRET. He really, *really* doesn't want to talk about Technoblade. He wishes he could just forget the Man. He wishes they'd never even met, but he knows the keenness that lies in Wilbur's eyes. Wilbur's decision determines whether Technoblade lives or dies. The thought doesn't Tommy feel like being honest though, it just makes him really scared, and being scared makes him really fucking angry.

"Why don't you *fuck off*?" he challenges, but he knows that even anger is an answer. The words are like an open wound, and Wilbur knows it if the way he narrows his eyes is any indication. A second of silence passes, and then — then Tommy breaks it because he doesn't

like how Wilbur keeps staring at him. “I don’t — don’t want to talk about it, okay?” he amends.

Wilbur finally looks away, and then he nods. “What do you want to do next, then? I can have someone check your bandages, or show you to your room, or we can go meet everyone.” Tommy is surprised he even gets a choice at all, and he thinks for a moment.

His bruises have faded in the past week, and where they were once tender and red, are now a light, barely noticeable yellow. They’re the only sign he was ever hurt at all, other than the many scars that litter his body. He doesn’t want anyone close enough to touch him — let alone another random member of Animal Army — and he definitely doesn’t want to see whatever medical equipment they have here. The idea of going to a room meant for him scares Tommy too. He doesn’t trust Wilbur not to lock him in it.

“Meet everyone, I guess,” he mumbles.

“Don’t feel pressured. They’re really excited to meet you, but they can always wait,” Wilbur says with another smile, and then he starts to walk further down the hallway. Excited. Tommy looks at the walls one last time. The Animal Army. He knows how bad of an idea it is to walk into a room full of humans. He’s a hybrid, and up until today, he thought all humans hated hybrids. These humans are different though: they dress like animals, they even name themselves after animals. He even remembers Wilbur mentioning something or someone called Tubbo too.

Tommy hates himself all the more for the hope that bursts in his chest. He stays back from Wilbur as the human leads him through another hallway, to a door where the sound and voices he heard earlier had to have been coming from. He crushes the hope in his chest until it’s completely gone.



Wilbur opens the door, and the sound of something low and rhythmic hits Tommy’s ears. He wonders just how many times he’s going to be surprised in one day, but he feels a certain kind of wonder overtake him once again. The room is dim, but similarly to the hallway earlier, lights of all different colors burst against the walls. There’s a group of people spread out across the room where a bunch of weird, shiny boxes sit on tables. They don’t notice him and Wilbur at first, but the door slams and a couple of them look up.

“Owl is back!” one of them yells, voice bright and young, and suddenly everyone turns.

“Guys, that’s the raccoon,” he hears another, lower voice say. Fear shoots through Tommy’s body, but he refuses to run from the eyes that settle over him. These are the other members of the Animal Army, but he recognizes one of them — the same one who greeted everyone on the balcony earlier. Tommy searches for Crow and Duck, and eventually finds both at the

back of the room off to the left. The members all surge together, and he can hear some of them whisper between themselves.

“As I said — ” Wilbur scoffs, “ — excited.” Tommy can’t help but take a step back at that word again.

“Why would they be excited to meet me?”

“Because they’ve only ever met — ” Wilbur starts to explain, but somebody bursts through the crowd of people and starts to run at them. Tommy scrambles back from the black and yellow human, and Wilbur’s concerned voice rings through the air. Whatever he says doesn’t process.

“Tubbo, wait!” someone else yells, voice deep and panicked, and he also surges through the crowd. The name makes Tommy freeze long enough for the figure to stop right in front of him. It’s a boy dressed in blue overalls and a yellow and black striped shirt with brown boots. His hair is a messy brown, and deep, dark eyes stare back at Tommy. It’s a boy with two *horns* sticking out of his head, and *ears*, and —

“What the *fuck* — ” Tommy begins, but he can’t get the rest of it out before the boy — *Tubbo* — interrupts him with a high-pitched noise that he’s never heard before. It comes out in a few short bursts before he’s speaking.

“ — Hi! My name’s Tubbo, err — Bee, but you probably already knew that! I’m a goat hybrid. You’re a raccoon, huh? That’s really cool! I’ve never met a raccoon hybrid before, but to be honest I’ve never met any hybrid — ”

“ — Tubbo, slow down,” Wilbur scolds, and that’s when Tommy realizes that everyone else is still staring at them. He can’t tell if they’re amused or angry at Tubbo, because he was apparently not supposed to be doing this.

“Oh, right,” Tubbo agrees with a slight movement of his ears, and then he’s silent. He continues to stare at Tommy with an excited look on his face. Tommy feels like his brain is lagging out. He can’t speak, but he doesn’t even know what he’d say even if he could. *He’s like Tubbo*. He didn’t think — there’s another hybrid. Another hybrid that can *talk*, and he’s *here*. Tommy has never even met someone the same age as him, let alone another hybrid before —

“ — Tubbo!” the same voice yells as before, and a human stumbles forward past the crowd. His shoulders are hunched — as if he’s trying to make himself shorter — but he still towers a good few inches above everyone else. His clothes are a half-black, half-white jean jacket, pants, sneakers, and a hood with two pointed ears at the top. The drawings vaguely flash through Tommy’s head as he finally realizes who these two are: BEE. CAT. “I told you not to do this. I mean look at him, he’s clearly overwhelmed — ”

“ — What the fuck! Who are you calling overwhelmed?! I’m not overwhelmed!” Tommy manages to argue again despite the fact that he definitely is. He’s about to turn and demand why Wilbur didn’t mention *any* of this, but Tubbo interrupts him again.

“— Oh c’mon Boo, he’s fine! What’s your name?” Boo? Tommy scowls at Tubbo, but he can’t hold the expression for very long. There’s something about being around another hybrid that instantly makes him feel safer. Tubbo’s clothes aren’t torn, and doesn’t look injured, unhappy, or scared. At least, not unless they brainwashed him or something. That’s definitely a possibility. It’s also a possibility that this was their plan all along — to bring in another hybrid in to make him feel better. Somehow, though, he feels as if this was the last thing Wilbur planned on happening.

“Tommy,” he answers hesitantly.

Tubbo grins. “Nice to meet you, Tommy! I guess you already know Owl,” he says as he gestures to Wilbur, who simply nods his head, “but this here is Cat.”

Cat looks down at Tommy and smiles a bit awkwardly. “Ranboo is fine too,” he says.

“And...” Tubbo pauses and looks at Wilbur again. Wilbur smiles, and the happy expression confuses Tommy. He thought Wilbur would be mad.

“Go on,” Wilbur says as he gestures towards the other members.

Tubbo nods, and then he grabs Tommy’s hand and links their fingers together. Tommy jolts at the touch, but just as he tries to yank his hand away, he’s stopped by the way the fingers squeeze once and then relax. “Come on! I want to introduce everyone,” Tubbo explains, but Tommy can barely focus on anything but the warmth that connects their hands. He’s known Tubbo for less than five minutes, but there’s something so fundamentally comforting about him. Tommy doesn’t remember the last time somebody touched him without trying to hurt him other than Sa — *back home*, and — and Technoblade. He doesn’t want that one to count. He still doesn’t know how much of Technoblade’s actions were a lie, but he can’t *not* think of them either.

Tubbo has a little goat tail, Tommy distantly notes. It makes him so much more aware of how his own tail presses against the back of one of his legs. Tubbo’s flutters back and forth as he leads him towards crowd of Animal Army members. Whether it be their hood, or the material of their clothes, or even a word, all of them have some aspect of an animal woven into their outfit. Each continues to smile or still has an excited look in their eyes that makes Tommy uncomfortable. He glances back and sees Cat start to trail reluctantly behind them. Wilbur has already walked past the crowd, and he leans against a wall off to the side with a satisfied look on his face. Tommy can’t figure out what that means before Tubbo starts introducing him to everyone:

ELEPHANT with her jean jacket, gray sweatpants, and black sneakers — a set of knives sheathed at her side. There’s hard leather stitched into the back of her jacket that forms the shape of an elephant hefad, white tusks included. “Hi, I’m Elephant,” she greets, “but call me Niki if you want.” Tommy has never heard a voice as soft as hers.

WOLF wears a dark gray, furred coat that wraps around him, a white undershirt, black, ripped jeans, and a hood with two pointy ears stitched into it. He carries no weapons that Tommy can see, but there are two metal things that fall over his chest, attached to a chain around his neck. “Wolf,” he says with no other name. His voice is young, like Tubbo’s, but he

still looks older. Tommy doesn't think he could be that much older though, maybe by just a few years.

DOG has a black hoodie and undershirt with a grey-furred hoodie. His jeans are also black, but they aren't ripped like Wolf's. He has a long sword sheathed on the clip of his belt. "Dog, or Jack." He doesn't have any hair. Tommy also didn't know people could be born without hair.

RAM's black hat has two horns sticking out of it that remind him of Tubbo's. These ones aren't real though, but made with plastic and spray paint. She also wears a black hoodie with a red RAM printed into it, matching pants, and sneakers with white laces. A strap is wrapped around her right shoulder, and connected to the bottom of it is a giant crossbow. "Nice to meet you, Tommy. My name's Ram, but I prefer Puffy." Her voice is deeper than Niki's, and where he imagines Niki as silently dangerous, Puffy seems the opposite: dangerously silent.

FOX's fur coat is a few different shades of orange with a matching hoodie over his head. He also has a white undershirt, dark blue jeans, and white sneakers. "Fox, or Fundy!" he introduces, and his voice is open and friendly. There's a long sword similar to Jack's strapped to his back.

SHARK's outfit stands out from the others only because he wears a face mask with a cartoon shark mouth and eyes on it. His sweatshirt is a dark gray, with another drawing of a shark etched onto it. The rest of his clothes include ripped, blue jeans, and gray sneakers. "Nice to meet you. My name's Shark, or Foolish," he grins. Tommy finds himself slightly disappointed his teeth aren't sharp even though that doesn't make any sense.

GIRAFFE's coat is red-laced and bright yellow with a regular gray hood. Tommy is confused for a second. He can't find any sign of an animal trait until he sees a patch embroidered into the human's black, ripped jeans. It's a human-like giraffe wearing a black hoodie, and underneath it are the words: DAP ME UP. As if on cue, Giraffe meets his eyes and says, "I'm a Giraffe! Dap me up, Tommy!" he spins around to show off another giraffe on the back of his coat, and holds a hand out.

Tubbo suddenly lets go of their hands. Tommy can't even decide how he feels about that before the boy leans in towards his ear and whispers, "It's fine. Charlie's a little weird, but he won't hurt you. Hold your hand out like this," he says with his own hand held up, palm relaxed. Tommy looks at the weird, happy smile on Giraffe's face, and he copies Tubbo. Suddenly, there's a hand that smacks lightly against his, and he jumps at the contact. His fingers are wrapped around Giraffe's, and then the human is out of his space as quick as he was in it.

FERRET is the same as Tommy last saw him. He still has his shades paired with a brown jacket and white fur collar. This time he can see the rest of the human, because there's no fence between them — his brown and white plaid pants and earthen-colored boots. His hood is down now, but there's a calm smile on his face when he looks at Tommy. "Gentlemen. I wanted to say hi earlier, but it wasn't the best of times. I'm Eret the Ferret."

CROW's black feathered cloak is gone, but underneath it, he wears a dark green dress shirt, with black dress pants, a leather belt, and boots. His hat is lifted just slightly above his eyes

this time, and he seems much more relaxed. The crossbow he previously held is nowhere in sight. “Hi, Tommy. Call me Phil,” is all he says, but his voice is uplifting. It’s no longer the cold, calculated ice that it was with Technoblade but a rich warmth this time. Tommy hadn’t even realized how tense he was in the presence of the human until he hears him speak again.

DUCK still has his cloak on. It nearly reaches his ankles, and the way the glossy black and green feathers spread out makes them look like duck wings. His face is clear of his beak mask, but the sword that he used to kill one of the Last Men is sheathed by his side.

“Welcome to our home, Tommy. My name’s Quackity,” he says. Tommy doesn’t feel nearly as threatened as he should, but maybe it has something to do with the lack of sharpness in the human’s voice. His expression isn’t angry, either. If anything, he’d think the human was happy to see him again.

OWL is last. He still has his brown feathered cloak on, but his hood is pulled down now to reveal long, messy hair, with one side that curls just over his right eye. A mocha colored sweater is hidden under his cloak, and his black pants end in white-soled, tan sneakers. He steps up to Tommy and his face still swirls black and white: the colors of an owl in the snow. “It’s good to officially meet you. I know you’ve been through a lot, but I hope that you can feel safe here with us.” The words are uncomfortably kind, and Tommy glances back at the rest of the members. Some of them nod, and some of them wait quietly. Tommy has never seen clothes like theirs before, but he tries his best to memorize each member’s really weird, but apparently real names. He doesn’t want to get caught not knowing them when he needs to.

The members continue to wait, and that’s when Tommy realizes why. They aren’t waiting on Wilbur but on *him*. To do something.

Tommy shuffles nervously. He can’t help the way his ears twitch and his tail curls against his leg. He doesn’t know what they want from him. “Thanks,” he says, and he hides the way his voice wants to shake. He has nothing to give them other than gratitude, and sometimes, that was all Dream wanted too.

“So, any questions?” Tubbo asks, and the silence that reigned is broken again. Tommy is about to say no, but then he sees shiny boxes near the edges of the room. He can hear sounds coming from them — things he’s never heard before.

“What are those?” he says as he points to them.

“Of course,” Wilbur states, but there’s a breathiness to his voice. “You’ve never seen a computer either.”

“Either?”

“When I got here, I asked the same thing,” Tubbo comments cheerfully. He grabs Tommy’s hand again and leads him over to one of the big boxes. Tommy can’t help but scrunch his face up at the lights that flicker across it in waves and patterns. There’s a figure on the screen that looks real and not real at the same time.

“What’s in them? Just lights and shit?” Tubbo squeezes his hand again, and his laughter is bright and loud as it fills the room up.

“C’mere, Charlie,” he calls out, and Charlie — or Giraffe, walks over and sits down on the seat in front of the box.

“The whole words in here, man,” he says, and then he takes a black square and pulls it over his eyes. Tommy just becomes more confused, and then a button on the thing below the box is pressed. A loud noise crashes in his ears, and Tommy steps away from it. Before he can run, though, Wilbur rushes forward and presses another button a few times. The noise starts to die down until it’s completely gone. He breathes out and looks down at Tommy apologetically.

“Ready? Watch this!” Charlie says as if he didn’t even notice what happened, and a figure appears on the box again. They look similar to the Animal Army members, and the box circles around them for a moment. They have a gray hoodie, with two ears on the top, and an animal mask. Tommy doesn’t know the animal, but to be fair he doesn’t know most of them. This one has two horns on the front of their face: one big and one small. “And look!” Charlie continues, “I get to be you.”

Tommy glances behind him. Wilbur is sat on a couch just in front of the other members, who have all formed a semi-circle to watch. He turns back to Charlie, but he can’t see his eyes because of the bulky mask covering them. “Why would you want that?” He doesn’t understand. Why would a human ever want to be a hybrid?

Charlie takes his mask off and looks up at him, but rather than anger, there’s confusion in his eyes. “What do you mean? We all wish we could be like you!” His eyes flicker to the rest of the members. “You and Tubbo.”

Tommy doesn’t *understand*. He looks at the ground and then back up to Charlie, but his ears flatten. Sam told him— but— but Dream told him— no, he *lied*. Was it a lie, though? Was it really?

It’s only fair that you take responsibility, Tommy.

He remembers the contrast of Bad’s soft voice, *Someone precious to me is sick. He’s dying, and the only way to save him is to reverse the virus*, and the pain that went on and on like fire up his veins until he let go.

“Well — ” Tommy starts, but then he cuts himself off. He reminds himself over and over again that Dream *isn’t here*. Sometimes he believes it. “ ...someone I knew told me that humans hate hybrids, ‘cause we caused the Sick.”

Wilbur’s voice is bold, but calm as he speaks up. “Most people are dumb. Hybrids didn’t *cause* the virus,” he argues, and Tommy turns around. The members are all looking at him, but none of them are smiling. Tommy feels the way Tubbo’s hand shakes in his now. Cat is looking around awkwardly, but he shuffles closer to them. As much as Tommy wants to change the subject now, he knows he can’t. He has to ask.

“Then who did?”

Wilbur shakes his head. “No one knows. But it *wasn’t* you. Hybrids are how the Earth survives.” He nods towards the boxes again. Charlie pushes another button, and Tommy turns around to see the Earth. The box moves across its surface, and Wilbur continues to speak. “Before the virus, Earth was dying. Humans... had ruined it, all for their own selfish needs, leaving us with nothing.” Tommy has heard these very same words before, and he wonders when exactly he stopped believing in them.

“They took everything they wanted,” Tommy echoes.

Wilbur is surprised into silence before he clears his throat. “Yeah. They did. They still do,” he agrees. “But once kids like *you* were born, the Earth could start to heal. You can live without taking. You can keep the Earth alive. And that’s why we vowed to always protect hybrids, no matter what the cost.” Tommy hears the other member’s voices as they agree, and the unity of their belief fills the air.

“And the Last Men?” Tommy doesn’t know exactly what he means when he asks, but he does anyway.

Wilbur stands back up. “Some of our families,” he begins, and Tommy sees the way his eyes settle on Phil for just a moment too long, “were slaughtered in cold blood. By Last Men. That’s because they had no one to protect them. But now, we can protect ourselves.” Tubbo’s hand starts to still in Tommy’s, and the relief that sets into his posture is clear.

Tommy knows he should be relieved too. Yesterday, he never would have believed a group of humans existed out here like this. It’s too good to be true. He knows it is. Sam *died*. Dream broke him. Technoblade betrayed him. There’s no reason the Animal Army will be any different even if they do believe hybrids are innocent. He knows how much power Dream holds. Does Wilbur? Do any of the members of the Animal Army? Do they even know the Last Men *have* a General? And what about Dream — is he aware of any of this either?

Tommy should feel relieved, and deep down, a part of him is. He doesn’t let go of Tubbo’s hand, and when he looks at the members again, he doesn’t expect them to attack him anymore. Despite all of it though, he’s still scared. He doesn’t think he’ll ever *truly* stop being scared, because Dream will find him. Tommy knows he will, and when that day comes, he wonders who will win. He wonders who Wilbur would choose in the end:

His life, or the Animal Army’s.

Chapter End Notes

CW: same as usual here... past abuse, fear of abuse, dehumanization, implied experimentation (reference to medical equipment), description of bruises

Fun fact: I was originally going to make Techno a part of the Animal Army, but then I guess I saw the potential angst and went for it. Also, I literally wrote an au set in a post-apocalyptic world where everyone has to scavenge for food, but I said nope I want Fashion. Everyone must have Outfits.

Hope everyone is doing well! Please feel free to leave a comment (even just a POG)!

I'll see you again next week :)

if we can see past fear, we can find out what really matters

Chapter Notes

Hi! I'm back!

I can't believe we're nearing the end. Thank you so much to everyone so far who's been enjoying this fic. I've really enjoyed sharing it with you guys, and I love seeing your thoughts in the comments!!

Here's chapter 4. It's super long. Hope y'all are prepared for this one.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Well, I figured since you’re staying here, you’d want to get to know where *here* is,” Tubbo starts to explain. Tommy doesn’t need to see the other members to know their eyes are still on him. Some of them, such as Quackity and Crow—*Phil*, he corrects, left with their weapons in hand to go do whatever. In the back of his mind, Tommy feels like he knows. The rest of the members apparently decided to stick around so they can stare at him or mess with the shiny boxes on the walls. He’s about to ask Tubbo how he even knows he’s staying here for sure. It’s not like he ever *said* he was.

“Hold on,” Wilbur says to two of the members across the room: Elephant—Niki, and Dog—Jack, before he’s walking over. “Hey, Tubbo. You giving Tommy a tour?” he asks as he stops just in front of them. Tommy tenses at the question. Didn’t Wilbur say *he* was going to show Tommy around? To his room? Wilbur’s face is surprisingly blank, but that only makes him more nervous.

Tubbo doesn’t seem bothered though. The boy looks up at Wilbur and grins. His posture is relaxed and open, and something in the back of Tommy’s head whispers: *brainwashing*. It doesn’t make nearly as much sense now, but he still thinks it.

“Sure am, bossman!”

Wilbur nods and then he turns his attention onto Tommy. “Find me when you’re done, okay?”

“Okay,” Tommy agrees, and he doesn’t think about why Wilbur wants to see him. Wilbur just nods again, and then he’s walking away. His boots pound against the stone floor as he goes back over to Niki and Jack.

“So, as I was saying before, Quackity is guarding the Blood God—” is all Tommy hears before he’s being led out of the room and down a random hallway by Tubbo. He stares at the dark gray walls, painted over with tri-colored blue, yellow, and red lines, and his ears twitch at the sound of his and Tubbo’s footsteps... until he hears a third pair and looks behind him.

“Why is *he* here?” he sputters out when he looks back and sees Cat. The human’s hood is up, and the cat ears attached to it poke up towards the ceiling. His black shoes shuffle back and forth as he trails a few feet behind them, and the noise makes Tommy’s ear twitch again.

Tubbo stops walking and looks back at him at the question. His eyes flit just past Tommy’s shoulder. “What’s wrong with Ranboo? He’s chill,” he argues. There isn’t any anger in his voice, but there is a hint of confusion.

Tommy glances back at Cat—or *Ranboo* again, and this time he has a slight frown on his face. He resists the urge to back away from the human, but then: “It’s fine, Tubbo. I can leave...” Ranboo agrees, and oh my *god*, this is suddenly way too awkward.

“Nevermind, I don’t care,” Tommy snaps before either of them can say anything more. Tubbo stares at him for a moment, and he can feel Ranboo’s eyes on the back of his head. Despite how much he obviously *does* care, Tubbo lets it go. He nods and starts walking again until they reach the door at the end of the hallway. Tubbo twists the handle. It opens with a groan, and night hits Tommy’s eyes when he steps through the doorway. The hideout is faintly lit by up torches, but in the distance, the Colorado wilderness stretches for miles on end. Tommy remembers what it was like to be out there, and he’s more glad than ever that he’s not right now.

“Where to first?” Tubbo asks with another grin.

Tommy reaches up to fiddle with one of the loose bandages on his arm. He’s still sore, and his feet hurt too, even though he’s long gotten used to the way they burn by now. He briefly wonders if Tubbo could find him some shoes if he asked. Tommy doesn’t. He doesn’t want Tubbo to get in trouble. His eyes travel around the hideout, and for just a moment, the pink road catches his attention again. It’s wrapped in darkness, but Tommy easily sees the way it twists into the sky. “What’s that?”

Tubbo follows his finger. His ears twitch forward. “That,” he says excitedly, “is a rollercoaster,” and he motions for Tommy to follow him.

“Rollercoaster?”

“You’ll see,” is all Tubbo says with a grin. He doesn’t reach for Tommy’s hand this time, but he does tug on his arm once or twice when he accidentally stops to stare at something for too long. Hey, it’s not *his* fault that the hideout is so strange.

Tubbo takes him down a few dimly lit pathways, and while some of them lead to colorful buildings and metal doors, others are followed by walls with realistic drawings of smiling humans. Eventually, they reach the bottom of the rollercoaster, and it’s so much bigger than Tommy thought it’d be. He looks up at the very top and once again wonders just what this thing was used for. There’s a sign at the front that reads: THE LOOPER, in big, faded pink letters.

Tubbo runs up and sets a hand on the sign. “So this is called a rollercoaster,” he explains as he looks back, and his eyes flicker past Tommy for a second. He must be looking at Ranboo. “It’s what people used to do for fun. They’d get in a— hmm, like a seat, and move through

the rollercoaster.” Tommy looks back at the rollercoaster and tries to imagine what Tubbo said. It’s a really strange thought, and if anything he feels *more* confused than before.

“That’s fucking weird,” Tommy says.

“Yeah,” another voice agrees, and it’s Ranboo still standing a few feet behind them. He looks hesitant, but he continues to speak. “I, uhh, honestly don’t understand it either. This one isn’t running anymore, but apparently before we were born there were thousands of these things, just, at places like this.”

Tommy looks at Ranboo again. “Wait, how old are you?” He doesn’t know why he never thought of it before. Hybrids were born after the Great Crumble, but there were plenty of human babies born just before. Did some of them live Pre-crumble lives, or were they like him: born into a world falling apart?

“Oh! I think I’m seventeen.”

“I’m also seventeen,” Tubbo answers.

“You *think*?” Tommy questions, because how can someone not know their own age?

Tubbo takes his hand off the sign and walks back over. “Ranboo kind of has memory problems,” he explains.

“Yeah,” Ranboo nods. “I have trouble remembering things. A lot of things, actually. My age is just one of them.” Tommy doesn’t know what to say to that, but he watches the way Ranboo awkwardly shuffles on his feet. He’s spent most of his life wishing he could *forget* things. Imagining it now though, he’s kind of glad he can’t. He wonders how afraid he’d be to start forgetting the things he cares about. He wonders if Ranboo already has.

“How old are you, Tommy?” Ranboo asks. Tommy isn’t stupid enough to keep asking about the memory stuff.

“Sixteen,” he huffs. Tubbo starts snickering. “Wha— shut up! So what if I’m a year younger than you guys?!” An angry chitter rises through Tommy’s throat and bursts out of his mouth, and his tail fluffs up bigger.

Tubbo’s snickering devolves into full-blown laughter once he hears it, and he can see Ranboo trying to cover up his own. *Traitor*, he thinks. “So you *can* make raccoon noises!” Tubbo exclaims as he clutches his side, and another high-pitched noise comes from him. Goat noises, Tommy realizes. Tubbo’s tail flutters again. They must be goat noises.

“What do you—! I’m *literally* a raccoon hybrid, of course I can make *noises*!” Tommy yells with another angry chitter, but this time he makes it on purpose. Tubbo makes another goat noise, and it sounds like a challenge to him. They walk down another path, the sound of Tubbo’s and his noises, and Ranboo’s quiet, but comfortable laughter in the air. As another chitter leaves Tommy’s mouth, he doesn’t quite understand the feeling that bubbles up in him. He thinks of Dream’s voice, and the next noise dies in his throat. He’s not a wild animal, is he? Dream said he shouldn’t act like one. He shouldn’t be *doing* this—

Tubbo bumps into his shoulder, and he runs forward a few paces ahead. “These are called bleats!” he yells, and he makes one yet again. His ears twitch happily as he meets Tommy’s eyes. “What about yours?”

Tommy’s fear dissolves, and it’s like a river that rushes through him after staying out in the sun all day. “Chitters, mostly,” he says. “But sometimes I whistle, I think, or grunt. I even screeched once when I was a kid, and Sam—” He cuts himself off, ears folding back for just a second. It feels so long ago now, but he can still hear Sam’s gentle voice as he tells him the different names of raccoon noises. He shuts down the memory. “Anyway,” he forces out, “where are we going next?”

Tubbo’s eyes scan the sky for a moment before he looks back. “Hmm... I reckon it’s getting pretty late, and I think Wil wanted to talk to you. How about we continue tomorrow? The rollercoaster lights are pretty cool at night, but everything else is easier to show during the day.”

“Sure,” Tommy says with a shrug, but that coldness settles under his skin again. Why does Wilbur want to talk to him? What does he *want*? Tommy knows they want something from him. That’s how it works. He just hopes that at the end of it, he’ll be able to see Tubbo and Ranboo again. He—he actually liked talking to them.



Tommy warily steps into the room where he met all of the Animal Army members earlier. There’s only two members left now, and he wonders where the rest of them went. Shark—whose name he can’t remember, and Ram—Puffy, are sitting at one of the tables near the back left corner. There’s a smile on Shark’s maskless face as he gestures with his hand, but Tommy can’t catch what he’s saying before Puffy sees them. When she does, she nudges Shark and he turns around. Whatever they were talking about before is unanimously dropped. “Hey, Tommy,” Puffy greets. “How was the tour?” Her voice is booming, but it doesn’t scare him.

“Fine. Tubbo showed me around,” he states.

“Yeah, we went to The Looper—” Tubbo adds on, realizing that Tommy isn’t going to say anything more, “—but I figured we could do the rest later. Where’s Wilbur?”

“He went out a bit ago, but he said he’d be back—” Shark starts to explain, but the sound of a door opening makes him stop. Tommy turns and sees the knob turn. Moments later, Wilbur steps through. It’s weirdly convenient timing.

“Oh, hey. You guys done?” he asks. His hood is down still, but his hair is even messier now. It looks like he’s pushed a hand through it one too many times. Tommy doesn’t think that’s a good sign.

“Yup,” Tubbo says with a nod, and then he meets Tommy’s eyes. He doesn’t smile, but he still looks relaxed. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

“Yeah, see you tomorrow, Tommy,” Ranboo speaks up after.

Tommy *really* doesn’t want Tubbo to leave. He’d even take Ranboo. Wilbur obviously wants to talk to him alone though, and it’s better this way too, he tells himself. If they aren’t around, then they won’t get hurt when Wilbur eventually gets mad and decides to hurt *him*. “See you tomorrow,” he echoes back. The two of them wave at Wilbur and the other members before they start to head towards the door. Despite the height difference between them, Tubbo and Ranboo walk side by side like they’ve done it hundreds of times before. They probably have long before Tommy showed up.

“Alright, I’ll see you guys tomorrow,” Wilbur says once again, tone neutral as he waves at Puffy and Shark.

“See you both,” Puffy says. Shark just returns the wave. Tommy stares at them for a moment, but he hurries to catch up to Wilbur once he realizes the human is waiting on him. The night air is chillier than it was earlier, and Tommy shivers as he follows. The silence washes over Tommy, and it starts to wind him tenser and tenser.

“Where are we going?” Tommy snaps when it becomes too much, and then he flinches back. Wilbur is letting him stay here, and he has to go and act *ungrateful*. He shouldn’t have said that, *he shouldn’t have said that*—

“To your room. We’re almost there,” Wilbur says. His eyes scan over Tommy again, but he has no idea what the human is thinking. Is he concerned? Mad? Angry, maybe? Tommy did yell at him earlier when they were in that room full of animal drawings. Now that he thinks about it, that was a really bad idea. His thoughts flash to Dream, and his ears flatten, tail curling around his leg. Dream would have been so, so mad at him. Wilbur didn’t act like he was earlier, but why else would he show him his room *alone*?

“These are the apartment buildings where everyone stays,” Wilbur cuts into his thoughts. Tommy can’t even remember approaching the building, but his eyes focus back. He needs to take it in while he can. It’s tall. *Really* tall, with dozens of windows, most broken or patched over with blankets, and a multi-colored brick pattern that has turned dull and cracked with time.

He hesitantly follows Wilbur into the inside of the building. The condition inside is only slightly better, but it at least looks like someone tried to clean it up. There’s a staircase that Wilbur starts to walk up, and *fuck* does Tommy want to pass out. He doesn’t even care if they give him a bed or not, he’d happily sleep on the floor at this point. Most of the time, that’s all he’s had anyway. His feet hurt really fucking bad, but he does his best to hide the pain as they ascend. Eventually, *thankfully*, they only go up two floors. Tommy tries his best to breathe, but he can’t hide a few winces that he’s sure Wilbur notices before he stops them in front of one of the rooms. *His* room.

“We’re here,” Wilbur states. ‘*Yeah, I can fucking see that*,’ Tommy wants to say, but he holds it back. The number on the old, tawny wood door reads 312. Wilbur turns the knob of the

door, and Tommy notices that there isn't a hole for a key lock nor a latch on the side. At least, not one that he can find from just a glance before the door opens and Wilbur steps inside. Tommy clenches and unclenches his fists. He doesn't want to go into this room. He knows what happened before, and he knows what will happen again. Wilbur is clearly waiting for him though, and he knows that really, he has no choice. Passing through the doorway, Tommy's mind goes to that old house he stayed in with Technoblade. That was different though. Technoblade might not have locked him in a room, but he was still lying to him.

Tommy looks around the room. Unlike the last one, this one is actually furnished. There's a decently-sized bed sitting in the middle with clean-looking sheets, and a little side table with a lamp on it. In front of the bed is a large dresser, and on top of that is a black-looking *thing* that reminds Tommy of the boxes. He didn't even think about it until now, but this hideout still has lights that work. The Last Men had that, but many of the places he ran past didn't—most were completely abandoned and stripped of everything valuable. Finally, at the back of the room is a window with patterned curtains, and the sight of it surprises him. Does it even latch? Aren't they worried about him running away?

Wilbur is silent, but he speaks up once he notices Tommy looking at him. "That door goes to the bathroom," he says as he points towards it. "Wait here for just a second. I have something to give you." Tommy tenses, but he nods. That doesn't sound good at all. He backs up towards the nearest wall, but Wilbur doesn't reach for him as he walks past. He goes over to the bathroom door and disappears inside. Tommy waits for a few agonizing seconds before the human comes back out with two *actual* boxes in his hands. They're both white: one clear and one solid, and he can smell *food*. Some kind of meat and vegetables that hit his nose and make him reel. He's tired, and hungry, and Wilbur brings the boxes over to the bed and gently puts them down on the sheets.

"There's food in one and a first-aid kit in the other. Clothes are in the bathroom whenever you want them. Also, feel free to knock on anyone's doors anytime too. If nobody answers, try another. Some of us are day-shift and some night. Do you need anything else?" Tommy absorbs the words for a moment. He glances down at the boxes, and then back up at Wilbur.

"What do you want?" Tommy asks suspiciously, eyes back on the floor to avoid Wilbur's expression. He tries to keep his voice flat and steady, but it wavers near the end.

"...Nothing?" Wilbur says, voice wrapped in hesitation, and Tommy doesn't know *why*. A few seconds of silence pass. "Tommy, look at me," he finally orders. The familiarity of it settles over Tommy. He slowly raises his head up and listens. Wilbur's eyes are tight.

Tommy doesn't know when he started shaking, but now he notices just how badly he is. He can't stop. He just wants Wilbur to hurry up and hurt him already. "Everyone wants something," Tommy states as he clenches his fists to try and stop the shaking in his hands.

"You're right," Wilbur amends. "What I want right now is for you to eat, use the first-aid kit, and sleep." Lie. That's a *lie*. "And I know you don't believe me," Wilbur continues as if he can read Tommy's mind. "I know you think I'm gonna lock you in here. I don't expect you *not* to. I'm sure you've heard it all before. That's why I'm going to prove to you that I mean what I say, because it's not promises or words that prove a person — it's their actions."

Tommy's eyes widen at Wilbur's words. He stares down at the dirty carpeted floor like it's the most interesting thing he's ever seen, but all he can think about are his words. They repeat over and over again in his head. It's always lies, and then it's pain, so much pain when he eventually messes up. Is Wilbur telling the truth? Does it not even matter like he said? If Technoblade—? No. He doesn't want to think of Technoblade, and especially not right now. Wilbur knows everything he's thinking: his doubts, his fears. Tommy is trapped between the bed and the wall. He's torn open and vulnerable, but he waits for Wilbur to do something.

"I'll be back in the morning once it's time for breakfast," is all Wilbur says, but he does wait for a response.

"Okay, thank you," Tommy whispers, because he doesn't know what else to do. It's always better to respond. To be grateful. Wilbur nods, seemingly happy with his response, and then he turns and really does leave. The door shuts behind him, but Tommy doesn't hear the sound of a lock. All he hears are Wilbur's footsteps as they slowly fade down the hallway.

Tommy is finally alone, and it takes him a few seconds to unfreeze. Once he does, he immediately goes to the entrance of the room. There's a lock on it. An *inside* lock. The door opens when he twists the knob and pushes. What the fuck? He runs over to the window a moment later and checks. Sure enough, there's a latch on it that opens too. If he really had to, he could escape out of it. Tommy briefly considers whether that'd be a good idea before the smell of the food finally breaks through his panic.

It sits on the bed. Innocently. Temptingly. Before Tommy knows it, he's opening the lid fully intending to devour whatever is inside. The sight of the food makes still him pause: canned meat. Peas. God, it looks *amazing*, but he hesitates anyway. This could easily be a test. Wilbur is letting him stay here. He could be mad tomorrow when he finds out that Tommy decided to really take all of this stuff. Does he even care anymore?

Tommy stares down at the food, plastic fork set on top of it, and he eats it as quickly as he can. His feet burn as he sits down on the edge of the bed. No, he doesn't care. He feels oddly detached from the fear under his skin moments ago, and it might even be concerning if he wasn't so focused on eating. The food is still warm and fresh, and just like everything he's eaten in the past week, it's the most delicious thing he's ever tasted. He wants to cry, but he doesn't.

He finishes every inch of it, and a part of him — well, most of him wants to pass out, but he knows he needs to go look in the bathroom. When he cracks the door open, it looks completely normal. There's a counter, a mirror, a toilet, and a shower. A few towels lie on a shelf. Wilbur wasn't lying either, because there's a set of clothes on the countertop and— and *shoes*. Sneakers. Tommy picks them up like they're the most precious thing ever. There's a note beside them that notices, and he skims over the messy handwriting.

saw you had no shoes, mate

-Phil

Oh, bless you Phil! Never mind *Tubbo*, Phil is his favorite person ever now and *forever*. The shoes end up being too big, but Tommy rejoices at the feeling of something covering his feet. His dirty, disgusting feet... Actually, he should probably take a shower.

After a shower that has warm water — how weird is that? — and a new set of fresh clothes: an oversized shirt and shorts that he pulls the drawstring tight on, Tommy's mind feels a little clearer and a little more sharp. He opens up the first-aid kit, breaths short and weak as he scans through the supplies. He doesn't see anything sharp though. No metal. No bladed edge. There's just tape, bandages, scissors, and some antiseptic.

Tommy's breaths begin to slow again as he takes his time removing the rest of his bandages that were still clinging to his skin. He decides his arms don't need re-wrapping — the bruises are nearly healed now. His legs still have some cuts on them though that stung from the soap, so he does his best to clean them up. He also doesn't really want anyone to see his scars. He can't hide all of them, but the bandages can hide most.

It's only after Tommy is finally done doing what Wilbur "wanted" that he collapses onto the bed. He just breathes as he stares up at the cream-colored ceiling, a spider-web pattern protruding across the space. He feels like he's floating up in the air a million miles away from everything that just happened. He's nothing but his own thoughts now, and inevitably, his thoughts always drift into the darkness.

He started to break the day Sam's fingers shook, and up until today, Tommy thought Dream *had* broken him. He should've known, though — with bruised wrists, bloody teeth, and throat torn screams, that he never really stopped fighting. That's the only reason he's here right now. He always has to hope for something *more*, and he thought — he thought he finally found it, until it was ripped away from him once again. He doesn't know how much longer he can go before he breaks completely.

You really are useless, Tommy.

You never listen.

You're nothing without me.

Shh, I'm here.

Dream's words melt into his brain like acid. He's so, so confused, but more than that, he's scared of tomorrow. His sobs mend and his thoughts tear with every truth and lie.

It's his first night with the Animal Army that Tommy crumbles apart.



Wilbur knocks on his door that morning. Tommy answers with a shaky kind of freedom. He feels better than yesterday. His clothes are new, bandages fresh, and shoes finally acquired. Wilbur guides him to breakfast in silence, and Tommy sees the hideout for the first time in daylight. It's different now without any lights, sounds, or the cover of darkness. The morning is a gentle thing, and silence reigns over Wilbur and him. It breaks only once they reach a building full of voices that makes Tommy's ears perk up.

He suddenly finds himself in a room with five Animal Army members sat at two tables pushed together. He's surprised that he can still remember everyone's names, their real names: Dog or Jack, Elephant or *Niki*— it was Niki, Phil, Tubbo, and Ranboo. There are half-eaten plates and utensils set in front of everyone. This must be breakfast. Most of the members are talking, others are— Jack starts yelling and the sudden noise makes Tommy jump. “What the hell! Give me back my sausage, Tubbo!”

Tubbo is sitting across from him, but doesn't cower at the harsh tone. He just grins wildly and shoves the sausage into his mouth. “What the— fuck you!” Jack continues to yell, but surprisingly, he doesn't attack Tubbo. He just flops down into his seat in resignation and shovels the rest of his food into his mouth — as if he's afraid Tubbo is going to eat the rest of it before he can. The other members burst into a wave of different laughs, and Niki puts a hand on Jack's shoulder, apparently trying to console him.

“Good morning,” Wilbur speaks up, and the members finally look over.

“Tommy! Come sit with me!” Tubbo yells excitedly, and Tommy reluctantly begins to shuffle over to the tables. There's an open seat next to the left of Tubbo that the boy points him towards. Ranboo is sat at his right, and he waves again when Tommy looks at him. Tommy hunches in on himself as he sits down. He's far too close to everyone for comfort, and he finds himself unconsciously leaning towards Tubbo.

“Good morning, Tommy,” Niki greets in a soft, friendly tone.

“Yeah, welcome to breakfast,” Jack says. “Just watch out for Tubbo. He's a sausage stealer,” he follows up with, and there's a bitterness in his tone.

“Am not! It's just payback for the time you stole my socks!”

“For the last time, I did not steal your socks!” Jack argues back.

“Alright boys, settle down,” Phil says with a laugh, and despite their arguing, they actually listen to him. That makes Phil laugh again, but this time he looks at Tommy and smiles. “Hello, I see the shoes fit.”

Tommy nods. “Uhh, yeah. Thank you,” he mumbles. He can't bring himself to look at anyone for too long, but his eyes do flit around the table. The members still have friendly smiles, but their previous conversations were left behind after he arrived. Tubbo happily munches on a piece of bread. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Wilbur walk around the tables and over to the other side of the room. He grabs a few things and puts them on a plate. Tommy realizes that it must be more food. He's really hungry, but he doesn't know whether he's allowed to eat or not.

“Oh, mate, don’t mention it,” Phil says. Tommy doesn’t. He watches as Wilbur walks back over with the plate and—and he *sets it down* in front of him. It has a piece of bread on it with a brown... sauce?, two sausage bites, a granola bar, and an orange-looking... fruit? He eyes the food and looks back up as Wilbur sits down at a chair diagonally from him. He sets another plate—obviously his own—in front of him, and stabs his fork into one of the sausages.

“What’s this?” Tommy asks, and then he realizes how stupid that must sound. It’s too late though. Everyone is already staring at him.

“The... food?” Ranboo asks cautiously.

“No—!” *What?* “I just—I mean *that*,” he says and he points at the food he doesn’t recognize.

“Oh! That’s called toast. It’s bread with peanut butter on it, and that’s an orange. It’s a type of fruit,” Tubbo explains cheerfully. Tommy can’t help but feel embarrassed. He still doesn’t really know what Tubbo means, but he nods and acts like he does.

“What do you normally like to eat, Tommy?” Niki asks, and everyone suddenly looks uncomfortable. Tommy scowls.

“Whatever—” *I’m given*, he thinks, and then he looks down at the food again. He used to actually be excited whenever it was time to eat. Sam would—“—Whatever. I’m not picky,” he ends up saying.

“I see,” Niki replies, but there’s pity in her eyes. Tommy hates it.

“You should try the toast, first,” Tubbo suddenly recommends. Tommy looks back down at the food, and then up at Wilbur one last time. He was certainly *given* the food, but he was never actually told he could eat it. The human is currently chewing on one of his sausage bites, but once he notices Tommy, he awkwardly nods and averts his eyes. That’s good enough for Tommy, so he listens to Tubbo and takes a bite of the toast. It’s warm and crunchy. He’s had bread before, but he’s never tasted “peanut butter.” The texture is thick, and salty, but there’s also a sweetness to it.

“Woah, this is actually pretty good,” he comments, and that’s what finally breaks the awkward tension. Phil cackles, and everyone else follows after him. Tubbo starts commenting on the rest of Tommy’s food as he eats it.

“... and the first time I had an orange, my face scrunched up so much that Wilbur thought I was in pain. But it’s just because I’d never had something so sweet before,” he grins. It makes Tommy wonder about Tubbo and where he came from. He obviously wasn’t *born* at the hideout. Was he raised like Tommy? Is he running away from something too? It’s hard to imagine Tubbo, so full of energy, going through something so awful. He thinks of Ranboo and his memory loss, and suddenly he wonders about the other members too. *Some of our families were slaughtered in cold blood. By Last Men.*

“Oh god, don’t remind me,” Wilbur groans. Tommy takes a bite of his sausage, but he can’t escape the overpowering smell of orange on his fingers. It’s kind of nice, actually.

“So, everyone else is on night shift?” he asks once he swallows, genuinely curious.

“That’s right. Puffy is actually on day shift, but I think she stayed up late last night. Normally, we split the shifts in half and members are pretty good at keeping the schedules. Wilbur is in charge of day and Quackity night. We usually go switch after this too,” Phil explains. Tommy briefly wonders if that’s why Quackity argues with Wilbur so much — he feels like he’s also in charge.

“It’s not like we *never* see each other though,” Jack clarifies. “Both shifts eat dinner together, minus a few members that still have to guard. And if you’re out at night you’ll most likely run into them anyway.”

Tommy remembers the members up on top of the main building, and he can’t help but ask more questions. “What else do you guys do besides guard this place?”

“Well,” Wilbur begins to answer, “there’s cooking and cleaning. Scavenging is also important since we always need more supplies. Then there’s how we met, of course: some of us go out and try to find hybrids to save.”

Tommy nods, and he finishes off the last bite of his sausage. Wilbur, Quackity, and Phil were out. That’s how they found him... him *and* Technoblade. *And when’s the last time we rescued a talking hybrid? Is that how Tubbo came here?* Tommy’s plate is empty now, his stomach full.

“Ready to go?” Tubbo asks him as he stands and picks up his plate.

“Yeah,” Tommy agrees. He also picks up his plate, and Tubbo and he walk over to the nearest trash can and dump them in. It’s only then that Tommy glances back to the table and realizes. “C’mon, Ran *boob*,” he says, and the human startles as he looks over at him.

Ranboo’s expression scrunches up in confusion. “Ranboob...?” he whispers in displeasure, and Phil’s cackle that follows is so incredibly contagious. The noise sputters out of Tommy before he can stop himself — somehow familiar and yet so foreign. He doesn’t remember the last time he laughed, but it bursts out of him bright and loud as Ranboo teeters up and out of his chair and places himself by Tubbo’s other side.

The three of them say goodbye to Wilbur and the other members, and Tubbo does exactly what he said the night before. He shows Tommy around the hideout.



Wilbur stands by the side of the bumper car rink. Flashing lights strobe against the dusk of night, and the sound of shifting and turning gears permeates off the walls of the building. He

listens to Tommy screech again as he slams into Tubbo. “Fuck you, bitch!”

The kid is stupidly loud. Wilbur has only heard his laugh once before, but he can’t help but smile again. He’s only known Tommy for a day or so, but even he can tell that he’s been hurt. Badly. And not just by the Blood God. There’s something more going on that he wishes he could figure out. Tommy cycles through aggression, confidence, and skittishness with a sickening intimacy. He keeps himself an arms-length away from Wilbur, expression startlingly blank, and posture as small as possible. There’s bandages on his legs that hide something, and the bruises on his arms tell a story of pain. Wilbur can tell that it’s clear something, or *somebody*, that taught Tommy to be this way. He would *love* to find out who. He wants to give them a piece of his mind. Permanently. With his gun.

Approaching footsteps break up the rest of Wilbur’s twisting thoughts. It’s Quackity. He coasts over and stands beside Wilbur. There’s a calculated expression on his face as he watches the rink, and the two of them fall into a tense silence until Quackity finally speaks. “How much longer do you really think we can hold him?” His hood is finally flipped down, and even if Wilbur couldn’t see the challenge in his eyes, he can hear it loud and clear. God, he’s as *petty* as ever.

“If he planned on escaping, why wouldn’t he have fought us earlier? He’s shown no signs of resistance so far. Besides,” Wilbur dismisses, “we’ve dealt with worse before.”

“That doesn’t mean *anything*,” Quackity stresses as he glances between the rink and back to Wilbur. “Nobody knows what he’s thinking. I don’t get why we can’t just kill him now. I’ve got Foolish all ready to go.”

Wilbur inhales sharply. “This is *different*. We’ve never had a hybrid protect their poacher before, and this is the *Blood God* we’re talking about. You saw how Tommy reacted. He *knew* he was being tricked, and yet he still refused to let us kill him.” He watches as Quackity glances at the rink again. Tommy screeches and another burst of curses come from him. “Aren’t you curious why?”

“No!” Quackity snaps, and he holds Wilbur’s gaze for a few seconds. “And you shouldn’t be either. It’s clear that Tommy has been through some shit. All of us have, and it’s all because of *him*. It’s all because of the Last Men.” This is getting nowhere. Wilbur already knows that, but he’s not going to let Quackity kill the Blood God. Not yet. Not when he promised Tommy he wouldn’t.

“Do I need to remind you who’s in charge?” Wilbur states, words cold. He stares into Quackity’s eyes, and it takes only a few seconds for the other’s expression to falter. He looks away angrily, but it’s clear that he isn’t going to do anything without Wilbur’s permission.

“You can’t run from me forever, Boob Boy!” Tommy yells. Wilbur turns away from Quackity and looks back into the rink one last time.

“No, Tommy! Wait—” Ranboo starts to plead, but it’s too late. Tommy slams into his car, and the two burst into laughter. Wilbur smiles again. He thinks of warm summer days, the black and lime tricycle he used to ride, and Phil’s steady words. His mom’s. Wilbur makes a promise to himself, then and there, that he’s going to do everything he can to protect Tommy.



Tommy sits at one of the tables and watches as everyone sings along to a bunch of Pre-crumble songs that blare out of a machine. Niki and Jack are on the dance floor, Puffy, Foolish, and Eret are sat on the right side of the table talking, and Quackity and Wilbur are filling up cups for people. On the other side of the table are the rest of the members and Tommy himself. The only ones he can't find are Wolf and Giraffe—Charlie, who he guesses must be on guard duty tonight.

Tommy has no idea how any of the music works, but it's pretty pog. He leans back into his chair and stretches his arms above his head. His stomach is full again, and he's tired. Running around all day was exhausting. Tubbo showed him the entire hideout, and then Ranboo led them to his favorite spot to watch the sunset. It was the most wonderful, craziest day Tommy thinks he's ever had. As much as he does want sleep, though, he doesn't *actually* want to leave yet. He doesn't want to go back to his room. His shoulder brushes against Tubbo's, and he leans into the touch.

Quackity suddenly slings an arm over Wilbur's shoulder. The plastic cups are now in each of their hands, filled with a weird, bad-smelling drink. Wilbur's drink sloshes onto his shirt, but his yells are overpowered by Quackity's singing. His voice is higher-pitched than normal, and he belts out the next few lines right in Wilbur's face. Tommy can tell that neither is *really* angry. At least, not right now. It's still strange. He didn't think they ever got along, but here they are *singing* together.

"Is this normal?" he whispers into Tubbo's twitching ear.

"Yeah, pretty much," Tubbo huffs. "Just wait though." As if on cue, Phil hoists himself up on top of the table and stands above everyone else. Tommy stares up at him in confusion. What is he *doing*?

"Attention, everyone! My next request is one you know well," he states.

Tommy doesn't know, but it must be good, because the rest of the members start chanting. "Philza, Philza, Philza...!" Philza? Is that his full name?

"Yeah, Phil! Let's go!" Quackity yells as he finally lets go of Wilbur's shoulder and barrels over to the rest of the members, a slight slur to his voice. Whatever song was playing before suddenly fades off as Phil gestures towards Eret. The human presses a button on his key... thing. Key *board*, that's what it's called, and the beginning of an upbeat song starts to play.

"Eret, you traitor!" Wilbur suddenly yells, and he must just now realize that whatever is going on is going on. He hurrily sets his cup down on the nearest flat surface and stumbles up onto the table. "Phil, stooop," he whines, and he walks over and grabs onto Phil's black-feathered cloak. Well, more like he *hangs* off on it.

“Oh, c’mon Wil. Tommy will like it!” Like *what*?

“What is going on?” Tommy finally asks. Tubbo doesn’t answer him this time. He just grins, and the song plays until a voice begins to sing.

Life isn’t quite what I thought it’d be

When I was a kid on VOIP

I thought when I’d get older

I’d marry her and I told her

Tommy’s eyes widen. The members start to sing along to the words, but the voice underneath them is— is *Wilbur*. It’s Wilbur’s voice. Music obviously came from before the Great Crumble, but Tommy didn’t think he’d ever actually meet someone who *made* one of those songs.

But now I’m twenty-six and I work in an office

Nine till five’s not the best I’ll be honest

If I could change a single thing

I’d make it me and not him

Wilbur stumbles off the table and collapses into one of the chairs. Phil follows him, but he walks over to Tommy and sits down closer to him instead. “This is one of Wil’s songs. It’s called ‘Your New Boyfriend.’”

Wilbur groans. He lifts his head up from the table and glares half-heartedly at Phil. “Daad,” he whines again and—

But he’s in your bed

And I’m in your Twitch chat

I’ve got the key

And he’s just a doormat

Wait. What? *What?!* “Dad?!” Tommy screeches. Phil cackles wildly. The rest of the members continue to sing the lyrics, but some of them look over and laugh at his surprise. “He’s your dad?!” Wilbur just groans again.

“Sure am,” Phil says with a grin. “And this,” he gestures towards Wilbur, “is my incredibly drunk son.”

Tommy feels his brain short circuit for a moment, and suddenly the way Wilbur looked at Phil when he mentioned family makes way more sense. “Oh my god!” he screeches again. Also, “drunk”? What does *that* mean? Does it have something to do with the drinks?

“Don’t worry,” Ranboo pipes up, “I thought it was weird too. I mean, Phil doesn’t look *that* old, but...”

“Phil *is* old,” Wilbur speaks up, words slurred just like Quackity’s were. “He’s old man.”

“Phil is practically ancient at this point,” Tubbo eggs on.

It’s then that Quackity comes over to the table, a giant grin on his face as he stares at them while they continue to tease Phil. “Now that you mention it...” he begins to say.

“Oh my— you little shits! I’m barely forty! If I’m old, that means you’re all children!”

Tommy laughs so hard he has to lean on Tubbo to keep from falling over.

He will return to his room later, still under Wilbur’s gaze, afraid to mess up everything that he’s seemingly gained. Wilbur won’t seem to notice this time, too out of it with whatever was in his drink. He will hum, and tells random stories, and lean against the wall with a smile on his face. In the morning, neither will mention it.

Until then, there’s a warmth that sets in Tommy’s chest. It takes him a long time to realize what it is, and before he can even stop himself, he thinks that he could get used to this.



Tommy stares up at the star-patterned sky. He doesn’t know why he came to Ranboo’s favorite spot: a little rooftop on one of the buildings that has the best view of the hideout, but he had to get away. It’s his third day here, and he couldn’t stay in his room any longer with nothing to do but suffocate on his own thoughts. Tonight is quiet, and chilly enough that he wraps his tail around him like some weird fur coat. He stares up at the stars and wonders.

The sound of muffled footsteps makes Tommy shoot up, and his ears twitch as they follow the source. Someone is climbing up to this spot, and he relaxes. Nobody knows about it

except Tubbo and Ranboo, so it must be one of them. Sure enough, Tubbo's horns pop up above the ladder a second later. "Hey," he whispers, a bit of surprise trails his voice.

"Hey," Tommy echoes as he lies back down again. He listens to Tubbo's muffled footsteps as he walks over. They sound different for some reason. The boy lies down next to him, and Tommy stares down at his *bare feet*. Did he walk like that the entire way here? Why is he here?

Tubbo yawns and shuffles closer. "Star-gazing?" he whispers again. Tommy doesn't know why, but it feels better not to disturb the silence cast over them any more than he needs to. He hums in agreement, and Tubbo stares back up at the sky for a few more seconds before, "Couldn't sleep?"

Tommy seethes for a moment. "No, obviously just felt like coming here. Besides, I'm a Big Man, and Big Men don't need sleep anyway."

It's quiet again, and then "... It's okay, I couldn't sleep either," Tubbo confesses. There's something about the raw honesty in his voice that gets to Tommy. It makes him want to talk.

"I just..."

"Yeah?" Tubbo pushes— no, *offers*. There's a difference.

"It feels like I'm fucking dreaming or something, and any day I'm gonna wake up and be back *there*. I'm gonna mess it all up because that's what I always do." He knows Tubbo doesn't know what he's talking about, not really. He's seen his scars though. Everyone has by now, but none of them have asked him yet. He's sure they all have their theories about where he got them from. They all think they know who gave them to him. They think they know his life, but they don't.

"To be honest, I still feel that way sometimes," Tubbo says. Tommy tries to hide his surprise. It's easy to forget Tubbo is like him — someone born into a world they don't understand, someone who has plenty of things to fear. He remembers how Tubbo's shaking hand felt in his. "I don't really believe in fate or luck or anything like that."

"Me neither."

Tubbo laughs softly. "I guess... the end of the world just has a funny way of making connections." Tubbo continues to speak, and Tommy listens. "When the first Wave hit, my dad did everything he could to protect me. His name was Jordan. I never learned my Mom's."

"What happened to her?"

"Last Men came to our house. I still remember what they said. I don't think I'm ever going to forget: 'We have reason to believe you are harboring an animal child. That gives us the right to come in,'" Tubbo lowers his voice to make himself sound like one of the Last Men. It might be silly if it were any other time, but Tommy can see the way the boy shakes as he says the words. It's chilling. Tommy imagines being there, and he knows that there's no happy ending to this story. "Under Dream's Code, we have the right to search your home—"

Tommy freezes, but the words shudder out of him before he can stop himself. “—Dream’s Code?”

“Oh. Yeah. I’m surprised you don’t know about it. It’s the code that started all the hybrid hunting. Some human named Dream made it.”

Tommy *knew* Dream was someone important. The Last Men listened to him. They — they called him *General*, after all, but he didn’t think — “You okay, Tommy?”

Tommy sits up, but he can’t bring himself to meet Tubbo’s eyes. He stares off into the distance instead. “He started the hybrid hunting?”

“Uh, yeah. Tommy, do you... know Dream?”

“*No!*— I mean no. I don’t. I’ve just— just heard of him before.” Tommy’s voice starts to shake. He tries not to panic. He tries not to give himself away, but he can feel Tubbo’s eyes on him. He curls his arms around himself and waits, tense and completely ready for Tubbo to ask him. To pry until his fears are scattered around them.

“So... the Last Men came to my house, and they broke in,” is all Tubbo says. Tommy’s eyes widen as the boy goes back to telling his story. “My mom got shot, but my dad made me run away. I was only ten when I hid in some empty supply box. I waited and waited for my dad to come back, but he never did. I thought for sure I was gonna die there, but then— ”

“—Wilbur found you?” Tommy guesses, and his voice is almost steady again.

Tubbo smiles, but then he shakes his head. “Phil did. There were barely any members back then: just Wilbur, Niki, Jack, Phil, and me. Then we kept finding more people, like Ranboo, or they found us, until eventually the Army grew into what it is today.” Tubbo finishes his story, and they fall into a comfortable silence. There’s a strength in him that Tommy doesn’t think he’s ever had. He’s able to smile and be happy even after he told Tommy about the worst day of his life, about all his fears, about what keeps him up at night. How does he do it? How does he not break apart after something like that?

“Hey, Tubzo?”

“What’s up?”

“Thanks.” Tommy doesn’t say what for: *For being here. For telling me your story. For not pushing. For everything.*

“No problem,” Tubbo says as he links their fingers, and together they stare at the stars.



Tommy shoots awake, heart hammering wildly in his chest. He scrambles out of bed, presses a shaking hand—*Sam's shaking hand as it grips his own*, against the wall. He tries to focus on breathing. He tries not to sink further and further into his own panic, but the last of his nightmare slithers itself into his brain and won't leave. *Sam singing, his voice crackling underneath the pain. Sam, Sam, Sam*—No, don't think. Stop thinking. Anything but that. It's memories this time, and you can't escape memories. You can only run from them, and that's exactly what Tommy does.

After that, wandering around at night starts to become a habit. Wilbur made sure he knew where his room was — where all the members were, the first day he got here. The last thing Tommy wants to do is bother anyone with his problems though. Wilbur is busy enough as it is, and if he's being honest, he still doesn't entirely trust him. The only member he thinks he really trusts is Tubbo, and maybe Ranboo... *maybe*, and that was after a considerable debate on whether or not either of them had been brainwashed. Tommy would know. At least, he thinks he would.

He scuffs his shoes against one of the paved paths. No, he's going to walk around until he's too brain-dead to think of much of anything. He doesn't know where he's going tonight, but he starts to unconsciously wander towards Ranboo's favorite spot anyway. Part of him hopes that Tubbo will be there, but he also hopes that the boy won't. He's haunted by plenty of memories too.

Tommy looks around the hideout again tonight. One week. He's been with the Animal Army for almost a week now, and it still feels unreal. He breathes in the smell of incoming rain, and it helps clear his mind. Off in the distant wilds, crickets drone into the night, and the lights of the hideout blink in a kaleidoscopic array of colors.

During these past few days, Tommy has fallen into a routine. Wake up. Eat breakfast. Annoy Tubbo and Ranboo while they do their various tasks. Eventually, on the days where they stood around on guard duty, they got sick enough of his complaints to send him to Phil. If Phil is too busy, then it's Quackity. Tommy hates feeling like he's being babysat, but anything is better than staying in his room all day. Besides, he's not about to complain. Phil gave him some shoes, and Quackity at least tries to make him laugh.

At night, Tommy hangs out with Tubbo and Ranboo more, eats dinner, and sleeps. Well, *tries* to sleep. For some reason, Wilbur always walks him back to his room, asks him if he needs anything, and comes back in the morning. Nobody yells. Nobody hurts him. Nobody asks about his past or his scars. Tommy expects them to. He always expects them to, but no matter how many times he does it never happens. Every day that Tommy stays, he starts to learn more and more. He hears things, and he sees things. He starts to piece together the lives of the members around him.

He looks up at the sound of footsteps, and a figure emerges from around a building ahead of him. It's Eret. He's still wearing his leather jacket with its fur collar. When he spots Tommy, he pulls his shades up and sets them on his head. His eyes glint as he wanders over and stops a few feet away. "Hey, Tommy. What brings you here this time of night?" he asks, but there's no edge to it

"Just felt like taking a walk," Tommy replies with a shrug.

Eret nods. “I’m just making my rounds. Try not to stay up all night, okay?”

“I do what I want.”

Eret laughs softly. “That you do,” he agrees as he pulls his shades back down again. He reaches his hand out, for just a second, Tommy tenses at the movement. Eret shifts, and then he pulls his hand back to his side and straightens up. “My apologies. I’ll see you at dinner.”

“See you,” Tommy echoes, and he watches as the human disappears around another corner. He doesn’t know what that was about. It reminds him of the time Wilbur grabbed his shoulder.

Tommy keeps walking. He scuffs his shoe on the pavement again when he hears a voice. How many members is he going to run into tonight? His ears perk up, and begins to walk towards the source. Their voice is low. Hushed. Whoever it is, it’s clear that they’re purposely trying to conceal their words. Tommy begins to catch them anyway. He’s lucky he has such good hearing. “—exactly what... *no...*” Tommy’s ear twitches as the sharp tone, and he approaches as quietly as possible. He gets close enough to figure out who’s speaking: Quackity.

“—heard what he said...” someone else states, and once again, Tommy recognizes their voice. It’s Foolish. He hasn’t spoken much with the human, but he’s never heard him sound like this before. Tommy presses himself against the nearest wall. He doesn’t want to peek his head out for fear of being seen, but he does lean closer.

“I *know*,” Quackity stresses, “and I’m telling you we don’t have any other options. Wilbur doesn’t see the fact that the kid has been *brainwashed*. The Blood God is a fucking monster. He would never just *give himself up* like this. Something else is going on, and I think it’s about time we get the fucking bottom of it!”

What?

“And how are we supposed to do that?”

“I’m *so* glad you asked,” Quackity replies.

That’s when Tommy finally unfreezes. He takes a step back, and another, and another. His heart is beating wildly again, and his hands won’t stop shaking. He feels oddly detached from everything he’s just heard. The panic floats just out of reach. Quackity continues to say something. Foolish responds. Tommy doesn’t hear any of it past the static in his head. He already knows what they’re saying. Quackity is going to— going to— he thinks Technoblade *brainwashed* him. Why? How?

What is he supposed to *do*? What *can* he do? He needs— he *needs to tell Wilbur*. Tommy runs. Where is he? What’s the quickest way to get to the apartments— to Wilbur’s room? His shoes slam against the pavement, but all he can hear is the gasping breaths that tear out of him. He runs for what feels like forever until he passes by one of the many buildings Tubbo showed him: an abandoned restaurant used to store food. He knows where he is, and as soon as he finds Wilbur, he’s going to tell him *everything*. He can’t let Quackity do this.

He turns the corner of the building, and—

— and he sees Dream.

Chapter End Notes

CW: past abuse, fear of abuse, implied experimentation (reference to medical equipment/scars), implied deterioration/loss of loved one, past dehumanization, description of injury (bruises/cuts), super brief reference to murder

I feel evil for leaving you guys with that cliffhanger... whoops?? Honestly, things aren't looking too good right now: Dream is finally back. Quackity is going to kill Techno. His betrayal probably isn't surprising, but it sure does have awful timing! Meanwhile, Wilbur is literally sleeping. What can I say... at least Tommy finally got some shoes??

Here's a few details about this chapter that couldn't make it in:

- Phil loves embarrassing Wilbur by playing his music, but he is also secretly bragging about his son when he does it too.
- Before the Great Crumble, Wilbur was a growing musician. A few of his songs were saved to a disc that he's kept with him ever since.
- With every initiation of a new member into the Animal Army, they throw a party and get drunk. It's probably not very smart, but it is fun.
- About the only time Wilbur and Quackity can stand each other is when they're drunk lol

If I think of more, I will add.

Feel free to leave a comment (even just a POG)!

I'll see you next week for the final chapter :)

family is what we make of it. each one of us. together.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone!! I hope you've all had a good week. Chapter 5 is here!!

Info on the future of this au is in the end notes.

Enjoy :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dream is standing at the end of the alleyway. His pale, pale mask stares, and he tilts his head up. “Hello, Tommy,” he says calmly. He’s here. He’s *here*. It’s like every nightmare Tommy’s ever had except this time it’s *real*. Is this real? He can’t—he has to find—*Wilbur*. Wilbur will protect him. He can see a gun curled over Dream’s shoulder, but he doesn’t reach for it. Tommy’s ears fold, and a croaky whine breaks from his throat before he can stop himself. He expects poison. He expects pain. Dream doesn’t move. He just keeps staring, and that only makes Tommy shake harder.

“No—how are you—” Tommy manages to gasp. “—How are you *here*? ” His eyes dart behind him. His only escape is the way he came, but he has to run.

“You shouldn’t have run, Tommy. Punz almost shot you,” Dream scolds. “And do you even know how much effort it’s taken to find—”

Tommy doesn’t let him finish. He bolts in the direction he came, but as soon as he reaches the end of the alleyway he crashes into something and *his arms are being grabbed*. Before Tommy can even think, he sinks his teeth into the person’s arm, and a strangled yell leaves them. He tastes blood. Pain races up his chest. He hits the ground, and all he can do is try to breathe. It takes him a second too long to realize he was kicked. “*Fuck*—he bit me *again!*” Punz. It’s always Punz.

“*Tommy*, look at me,” Dream says. Tommy freezes where he lies. He doesn’t want to—he doesn’t—a hand grabs his chin and forces him to look up. Dream’s pale mask stares down at him. “This is what happens when you leave. You start to forget the things I’ve taught you. You forget how to not be a wild animal.” Tommy tries to pull the hand off, but Dream’s grip only tightens more—to the point that it aches. He’s *not*, but—but he’s made *so* many noises since he ran, and he messed up, and—and he just bit Punz *again*.

“No- I-”

“What, Tommy?” Dream’s voice is dangerously calm, but he lets go of Tommy’s chin anyway. Tommy doesn’t try to run again. He stares down at the dirt and holds back a sob. Disappointed. Dream is *disappointed*. He has to say something. He has to *apologize*—

...its not promises or words that prove a person, it's their actions.

Tommy doesn't know why, but at that moment, Wilbur's words echo through his head with a stunning clarity. Wilbur is the only person who ever promised him that he wouldn't make promises. He gave Tommy something *better* to believe in than that.

Tommy looks at Dream's arm and his eyes stay on the scar. It stands out harshly, pink and slightly raised where Tommy's teeth sank in. That's the last and only time he ever bit Dream. Tommy reminds himself why. He forces himself to stare up at Dream's mask.

Ever since he escaped, he's met so many different people, but none of them have ever hurt him — not like Dream has. Dream promises, and lies, and makes him feel worthless. That's why Tommy ran away. That's why he's here and not trapped in *that place*. It's the thought of everyone that gives Tommy the strength to fight. "You're wrong, Dream," he says. His voice shakes, but he continues to speak. "You're wrong. I'm not a wild animal, and— and I'm never going back there. I'm never going to be your sick fucking science experiment again!"

Dream starts to laugh. It's a quiet, controlled thing. It's the last thing Tommy expected. He thought Dream would be mad, but— the laughter suddenly fades, and Dream kneels down to his level. "Oh, Tommy. You're still so naive. Do you think that if you escape again you can live here? You think they want you back after what you did?"

"W-what?"

"Why do you think you were able to run away in the first place?" Dream presses. "You really think you *ever* would have been able to get out on your own? It's because I let you go! And it worked! It actually *worked*. I've been trying to find this place for *years*, and you led me right to them." No. That's not true. Tommy *escaped*. He waited for the right day when nobody was even thinking of him. The door was unlocked, and he ran—

"No— you always do this! You're *lying*!"

"I'm not, Tommy," Dream soothes. "I caught up to you a few days ago. I've just been waiting for the right moment to take you back." The right moment. Tommy's eyes widen. Quackity. That's why nobody can hear them. That's why nobody is coming. How easy would it be to sneak past the guards when there's barely anyone guarding? Eret was away from the entrance. Quackity and Foolish were talking. Where is everyone else?

"No..." Tommy whispers, some small part of him still trying to deny the truth. Dream's hand reaches out towards him. It makes him flinch, but the hand brushes through his hair. It's comforting. Tommy tenses up under the touch, but it's still comforting. Punz is standing in the same spot, and his hand presses a piece of fabric down against the bite wound on his arm. He's looking out of the alleyway, but when he glances down, Tommy can see the blankness— no, it's not just a blankness. There's detachment in his eyes. He doesn't care about Tommy. He doesn't care what happens next. Does he even care about Dream? Does he care about anything?

"Who knows what they'd do to you once they find out," Dream muses, and he's right. "It's okay, though. I'll be here to protect you." If someone was nearby, if any one of them could

hear Dream's voice, even if they *knew*, would they care? Why would Wilbur ever protect him after this? Dream has been here for nearly a week, and he's been watching this entire time. Tommy knows everything about the Animal Army, and now— now Dream knows too.

Dream's hand leaves his hair, and suddenly there's fingers wrapping around his arm. The grip is tight, and he can barely think before he's pulled up and off the ground. It hurts- it *hurts*— “I'm sorry, I'm sorry—” Tommy gasps out before he cuts himself off. He holds back another whine, and then the grip loosens for just a moment.

“Now,” Dream says, “are you going to be good? Are you going to listen to me this time?”

Tommy answers.



Wilbur yawns as he knocks on Tommy's door. He waits a few seconds, but there's no answer. An immediate feeling of wrongness settles over him. Tommy always answers within the first few seconds. He doesn't know if it's because the kid is an early riser, or if he's just scared to keep Wilbur waiting. Either way, he always answers.

“Tommy?” he calls out nervously. Nobody answers, and there's no noise from inside the room. Wilbur tries the doorknob, and it turns. The door isn't locked. The wrongness he feels only grows. Tommy never leaves his door unlocked either. “I'm coming inside, so tell me if you don't want me to,” he says as he gently opens the door the rest of the way. Wilbur steps inside, and it takes him only a few seconds to realize that Tommy *isn't here*.

He rushes out of the room, not even closing the door behind him, and tries not to panic. It's difficult, but he tries not to. This doesn't necessarily mean something *bad* happened. Tommy could be with Tubbo, or Ranboo, or any of the other members. He could have gone to breakfast by himself for some reason. He could be sick of Wilbur.

Wilbur runs to the breakfast hall first. His pace is frantic, and he sees Niki on the way there. “Hey, Wilbur—” she begins to say, but she must see the look on his face. Her smile falls. “Are you okay?”

“Have you seen Tommy?”

She hasn't.

Niki and he get to the breakfast hall. Wilbur slams the door open, and the day shift members jump at the noise. Phil meets his eyes, and he gets up from his chair in one sharp movement. The screech of its legs drags against the floor. Wilbur doesn't know what he looks like right now, but he's finally started panicking. His breaths are short, and his heart won't stop crashing in his head.

Phil approaches him and places a hand on his shoulder. He looks worried. “What happened?”

“I can’t find Tommy,” Wilbur pants. “Niki hasn’t seen him— Have any of you?”

“I haven’t,” Phil says with a head shake, and he looks over to the others.

The remaining members get up from their chairs and group up near the entrance. Tubbo’s ears fold back, and he frowns. “The last time I saw him was at dinner.”

“Me too,” Ranboo agrees.

“Are you sure he didn’t just run off somewhere?” Jack questions, but even he sounds unsure.

“Tommy wouldn’t do that,” Puffy argues.

Wilbur realizes what he has to do next. “...I need to speak to Quackity.”

The six of them stand in front of Quackity’s door. Wilbur knocks as hard as he can on it, and every second they wait is one second too long. Where could Tommy *be*? Did he get lost? Is he hurt? Did someone find him— no, there’s no way that could have happened. Nobody could have gotten past the guards last night. Where is he then?

A noise comes from the inside of the room, and a few seconds later the door is being yanked open. Quackity stands at the entrance. He’s in a pair of dark blue pajamas, with bare feet and hair messy. He looks like he just got out of bed, and he probably has. His eyes slip from Wilbur to the rest of the members. “*Wilbur—*” he sputters out, “—what the hell is going on?”

Wilbur doesn’t take the time to mock him. He just gets to the point.

“Tommy is missing. Do you know where he is?”

Quackity’s eyes widen. “Shit, I haven’t. Nobody else...” he begins to say, but then cuts himself off just as quickly. “—Wait! Eret— I think Eret saw him last night.”

Eret answers the door looking much more put together. He’s wearing a bathrobe and his shades are off, but his hair at least looks brushed through. When he sees everyone, his face shifts in confusion. “Woah— everything okay?”

“You saw Tommy last night,” Wilbur states. “When?”

“Oh!— while I was patrolling. He said he was taking a walk, and then we parted ways near the food court shortly after.”

“And you didn’t see or hear anything after that? None of us know where he is.”

“The rest of the night was quiet. I did my rounds and went to sleep,” and with a head shake Eret apologizes, “I wish I could tell you more.”

Wilbur asks the rest of the members.

“Tommy? I didn’t hear or see anything,” Foolish says as he shuffles in his shark slippers with eyes are full of something Wilbur can’t quite place. It’s more than likely concern. He grabs his mask and gestures for them to move.

“I stood guard all night,” Wolf explains calmly as he drops his hand away from his sword. He’s still wearing his fur hoodie, but rather than jeans, he has a pair of sweatpants on. “If something happened,” he states, “it was on the other side of the park.”

Wilbur nods. Eret already told them that.

“I was with Wolf,” Fundy admits guiltily as he grabs his sword and straps it to his back.

“Why?” Wilbur presses.

“Well, Charlie didn’t really need me,” he chuckles nervously. Wilbur tells him to throw on his shoes and follow them.

“Tommy?” Charlie frowns, and it takes him a normal amount of time to answer, but every second feels agonizing. “Nope!” he says as he gestures behind him. There’s at least a dozen weapons strewn across the room. “I was cleaning weapons and making food. Where do you think he went?”

Wilbur doesn’t know.

Charlie wasn’t even outside. Nobody has seen Tommy. Nobody knows where he is. Wilbur has them search the entire hideout. Nothing. Tommy is gone. “Fuck... fuck!” Wilbur yells, and he presses the heels of his palms against his eyes. “What do we do?”

Tubbo bleats lowly, and his ears droop.

Ranboo places a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

Phil clenches his eyes shut. “He could be anywhere by now,” he grits out.

“Shit...” Jack crosses his arms, and his gaze never leaves the concrete. He looks a lot older than he should.

“No,” Quackity spits, “I know what we need to do. Who we need to speak to. In fact, I know who did this shit.” His voice is calm, but there’s anger in it too. The anger makes Wilbur curious.

“Who?” Tubbo asks frantically.

Quackity smiles, but there’s nothing friendly in it. “The Blood God.”

Wilbur tries to convince everyone to go back to whatever they were doing. He can't bring this many people into a cell, and especially not one that holds the Blood God. The Man has been agreeable so far, but Wilbur doesn't trust him one bit. Tommy is missing. What's stopping the Blood God from breaking out now? What's to say this wasn't his plan all along?

Most of the members agree, although Wilbur can see the worry that passes over their faces. There's frustration there too.

"Let us know as soon as you find something." Niki.

"I really hope the kid is okay." Charlie.

"We're going to find him. I promise." Puffy.

"It's my fault. I should have paid more attention." Fundy.

"If he's survived this long, he'll live." Wolf.

"Hang in there, Wil. There's a good chance the Blood God will know something." Eret.

Their words make him realize just how attached everybody has gotten to Tommy. How attached *he*'s gotten. Everyone else refuses to leave. Quackity and he are going together, he can't argue with Phil — not right now, Tubbo stubbornly refuses until they let him come along, and Ranboo won't let Tubbo go without him. When Jack starts to argue, Wilbur gives up. The last thing they need to be doing is arguing.

As they stand outside of the cell door, Wilbur has no idea what to expect. The last time he was here was nearly a week ago. The members placed in charge of guarding the Blood God have been Phil and Foolish. Quackity opens the door, and he half expects to see nobody inside. He's wrong. The Blood God is sitting at a table, and there's a book held in his hand-cuffed hands. It's such a strange sight to see the Blood God *reading*. His boar helmet, crown, and cloak were taken from him the day he got here. The items are being held in one of the storage rooms right now. At the sound of the door, he looks up, but his face is startlingly blank. "What the fuck did you do to him?!" Quackity yells without wasting even a second.

"Quackity, wait!" Wilbur protests, but it's pointless. Quackity rushes across the room, grabs onto the Blood God's shirt, and hauls him out of his chair. A hand wraps around Quackity's arm, and Wilbur tenses at the power in it. The Blood God doesn't push Quackity off though. He waits.

"Who?"

"Don't act like you don't fucking know! To *Tommy*, you piece of shit!"

Something shifts in the Blood God's face, for just a moment, so quick that if you weren't looking you'd miss it. Wilbur doesn't. "Tommy is missing," Tubbo speaks up, but his voice

falters when the Blood God looks at him. He shrinks back behind Ranboo, and the other boy places a hand in front of him protectively. Jack shuffles closer to them. Wilbur knows why Tubbo is so scared. He's heard the stories, and he's met plenty of Last Men in his life to know who the Blood God is and what he's done. They all do.

"Why do you think I know? If you hadn't noticed, I've been in this cell the entire time," he helpfully points out.

"I *know* you know *something*. If you don't tell us right now, I swear to god I'm going to kill you!" Quackity snaps, and his hands twist further into the Blood God's shirt.

"Yeah, you made that clear last night." Now *that* makes Wilbur pause. He turns and looks at Quackity, and the other's face suddenly falls blank.

"What is he talking about?"

"Oh, that's funny," the Blood God drones, voice completely flat. "Your boss doesn't even know."

Quackity shoves the Blood God back into his chair and stumbles back angrily. "He's not my fucking boss!"

"Quackity, what did you do last night?" Phil cuts in, and his voice is low with anger. It leaves no room for anything but the truth. A few seconds of silence pass, and it's clear that Quackity doesn't want to respond. He stares at the wall and clenches his fists.

"He interrogated me. Told me if I didn't answer his questions, he'd come back the next night and kill me," the Blood God explains.

"You may have forgotten what the Animal Army stands for, Wilbur, but I *haven't*," Quackity confesses. Wilbur recoils at the words, and when he meets Quackity's eyes again, he's clearly angry. Wilbur has been around Quackity for a long, long time though. He remembers the first time they met, and the way he learned to depend on Quackity as much as he learned to hate him. That's why Wilbur knows there's guilt in his eyes too.

"What the hell!" Jack screams. Tubbo and Ranboo are frozen in place. Phil looks furious, but he holds back his words.

Suddenly it all makes sense. Quackity was here last night when he shouldn't have been. Charlie was doing two different tasks. Who else was where they weren't supposed to be? Who else has Quackity gotten involved in his plan? How many members are against Wilbur now? How many just lied to him? The same night that Quackity wasn't at his post, Tommy went missing. If he was taken by someone, it's *Quackity's* fault, and he blames himself for it.

"*You— you betrayed—*" Wilbur begins, but he's suddenly cut off.

"—Stop! It- it doesn't *matter*," Tubbo says as he raises his voice. "None of this matters right now. The only thing that matters is finding Tommy." Wilbur has never heard Tubbo speak

like this. He's never heard him take charge over all of them. In any other situation, Wilbur would be incredibly proud.

"Yeah," Ranboo agrees with a nod.

"He's right," Phil states.

"How are we supposed to do that? The only thing we've figured out is that Quackity is—is a—" Jack stutters as he tries to say the word. Wilbur doesn't let him. He turns his full attention back on to the Blood God, and their eyes meet.

"—Blood God. No, Technoblade," Wilbur chooses to say, and a flash of surprise passes over the Man's face at the name. He remembers the way Tommy said it. "I *know* you care about Tommy. I don't know why, but there's no other reason you wouldn't have broken out by now. If you know anything, *anything* that might help us find him, you have to tell me."

The B—*Technoblade* stands up from his chair, and there's an obvious limp in one of his legs despite how he tries to hide it. Everyone shifts back at the movement. Wilbur can barely breathe, and at some point he thinks he stops entirely. Was he wrong? Did Technoblade ever really care about Tommy at all? If he's *wrong*— "Tommy was captured by some Last Men before I found him," Technoblade begins, and Wilbur tries to hide his relief. "I don't know much about it, but if he's suddenly gone missin', there's a good chance they found him again. I even have an idea of who it might be. One night he was scared enough to mention Dream's name."

Quackity puts his hands on his head, and his eyes are wide when he speaks next. " *Dream* ? As in, the man who made 'Dream's Code'? As in, the *General* of the Last Men?"

"The one and only," Technoblade confirms with a nod.

Wilbur drags a hand over his face, and then he lets it fall back down to his side. He knows who Dream is. Of *course* he fucking does. He's never seen the Man's face before, but he knows his name. Dream is an enigma. He's a man who rose up after the Great Crumble and united humanity against hybrids as much as he is a monster. He stands for everything the Animal Army doesn't, and *fuck* he might just be the one who took Tommy.

"The General..." Phil echoes warily.

"The General?" Tubbo asks, and he glances between their faces. Tubbo was too young to know Dream's title, but he knows his name well. Behind him, Ranboo looks just as confused. Wilbur wishes he could have kept it so neither him nor Ranboo ever had to hear either. Jack's face is blank. He knows who Dream is. There's no reason he wouldn't—he almost became a Last Man, after all.

At their silence, Tubbo's tail flutters and his eyes harden. "I think you're right. I mentioned Dream's Code to him, and he started acting all suspicious. He didn't just seem surprised by the code itself, but by the name too."

Wait. Tommy knows Dream. *Tommy knows Dream*—

Technoblade lets out a single emotionless laugh, and he finally sets his book down. The cover faces the ceiling, and Wilbur can read it clearly: *Stories from the Iliad*. “You guys are in luck. If it really is Dream, I know *exactly* where to find him.”

“So, you’re going to help us?” Quackity asks suspiciously.

“I’ll help you, and I’ll become the Blood God one last time.”

=====

Tommy is in a nightmare again, except it’s the one where he’s still awake. No matter how many times he blinks, he’s still awake. He nearly forgot what that was like, and now, he realizes that he should’ve appreciated it more. He’s never going to get it back. Nobody wants him. Nobody except Dream. The more Tommy thinks about it, the more he starts to wonder if it’s true.

His throat hurts like a bitch — scratchy and raw from yelling so much, and his arms burn. He hasn’t seen his face, but it stings. Tommy is pretty sure there’s a nasty bruise below his eye. He swallows again, and it feels like he’s trying to eat sand. The sand makes him cough, and the cough makes his ribs scream. His stomach aches. Tommy didn’t think it could get much worse after the hunger, but it did.

Dream made sure to remind him of everything he did wrong this past week. If Tommy thinks about it for too long, his head starts to feel fuzzy, so he doesn’t. He just curls further against the corner of the room and waits for Dream to come back. He’s scared of Dream. He’s scared of what they’re going to do to him. More than anything, Tommy is scared of his own thoughts. He doesn’t know which ones are his and which ones are Dream’s anymore. He knows Dream is a wrongen and a liar, but he craves comfort. Dream protects him. Dream is the only one there for him now. He wants to do everything he can to be *good*, and— no, *no* he *doesn’t*. That’s *wrong*. That isn’t what he wants. But isn’t it?

It’s happening again. Tommy forces himself to breathe. What he *really* wants is to see Tubbo and Ranboo again. He wants to hold their hands. He wants to hug Wilbur and go ask Technoblade a million questions, but it’s too late.

Was anything he ever did really him?

Would it have been better if he’d never even escaped to begin with?

What would it have been like if he’d never found out Technoblade was one of the worst Last Men ever to live?

What would Wilbur think of him after he betrayed them? Dream asked him so many questions, and he had to answer. He *had to*.

Footsteps echo down the hallway, and Tommy's head snaps up. He tries to push himself further into the corner of the wall, but he's already as far back as he can physically be. The footsteps get closer and closer, until they stop in right front of the door to his room. Tommy waits, and he hears the sound of a key turning as the door unlocks. It's Dream. It has to be Dream.

It isn't.

It's Bad. He's still wearing his faded white lab coat with red scrubs. Tommy watches as he looks around the room, a flash of confusion on his face until he spots him curled up in the corner. Bad suddenly looks a lot more nervous, and the change makes Tommy tense up further. There's only one reason why he would be here, but something still feels wrong. He's never seen Bad without Dream in the same room. Bad has never even been here before. Dream is always the one to come and get him—“You need to come with me,” Bad states. When he first heard the Man's voice, Tommy thought it was almost sweet. Now, he knows better, because even the sweetest voices can hold something sickening in them.

“You don't have to do this. *Please*—just...” Tommy starts to plead. He doesn't know why he tries to convince Bad again. He knows it's useless. It's never worked before.

Bad cuts him off. “—Come with me,” he orders this time, but rather than come out as one, it sounds more like a plead.

Tommy does.

He's led out of the room and down the nearest hallway. Bad's pace is much faster than usual, and he struggles to keep up. His ribs hurt with every step, and his leg isn't much better. They keep walking, and keep walking... Tommy briefly wonders why they haven't stopped yet. As far as he can remember, the lab wasn't *that* far away. He doesn't even recognize where they are anymore. He keeps silent. He doesn't want Bad to suddenly realize his mistake and take him back.

Bad stops them at a grey, metal door. Tommy stares up at the sign above it. EXIT, it reads in faded green letters. He snaps his head back to Bad, and the other's face is twisted up now. He won't meet Tommy's eyes. “Why?” Tommy asks shakily.

Bad shakes his head. “You need to leave... before someone finds out what I've done,” he states again, but his expression flickers.

Anger explodes in Tommy's chest, and it quickly overpowers any fear he felt. “No! Answer me! Why *now*—” he can practically taste sand, and it makes him choke—words cut off by the sound of his coughs. It feels like forever until it stops, and then Tommy forces himself to look at Bad again. He has a million questions, but out of all of them, that's the one that circles in his head over and over: *Why now? Why now? Why now?* Why not every time he's ever begged Bad to stop?

The emotion in Bad's eyes flickers again, but he still won't look at anything but the wall. He seems to argue with himself for a moment until he straightens up and speaks. “You're right. You deserve the truth... and the truth is that I can't do this anymore. I've done horrible,

unspeakable things. I've done everything in the name of love. I've lied to the person I cherish the most, but—but I was *wrong*. What kind of love is this?" Bad voice's cracks on the last word, and his legs wobble. He slips down the side of the wall and starts to cry.

Tommy can hardly believe what he's seeing. He hates how he has to ask himself once again if this is *real*. "What the fuck— You're... crying? *You're* crying. You think you have any right to be *upset* ?!" Tommy's throat burns with every word, but he keeps going. " *You* weren't treated like a sick fucking science experiment! *You* didn't have to wake up every day wishing you were dead! That was *me!* *Look at me!*!"

Bad lifts his head up and he finally meets Tommy's eyes. He used to scare Tommy to the point that he couldn't even speak. Now, Tommy realizes the truth. Bad is a monster, but he's also a man. He's just a *man*: a pathetic and small man who looks up at him like he wants Tommy to hurt *him* instead of the other way around.

"So..." Tommy begins with a sharp laugh, "...you've suddenly gained a conscience? Is that it? You've suddenly realized what a bad person you are?"

Bad shakes his head again, but he doesn't look away this time. "I hoped you'd never come back, after you ran, and I thought: '*How could I think that? I need to find a Cure. I'm going to lose everything if I don't.*' But I knew why. I always knew why. I told the General that I needed you alive, but there's a point where that was no longer *true*. I- I left the door open one night so that you could escape."

Tommy's eyes widen. What? Is that really true? How could it possibly be? Bad's eyes are open and honest. He's not—he's not lying. "You- you helped me escape, because... you were going to kill me to- to find a Cure," Tommy breathes out, but it's not a question. He knows it's true now. Dream—but Dream told him it was—he lied. Dream *lied*.

"*No!* No. I wasn't—I couldn't... You are a *wonder*, Tommy, and all I've done is hurt you. You need to leave and never come back here again... I'm *sorry*, Skeppy," Bad continues, but he isn't talking to Tommy anymore. "Forgive me, please forgive me... I swear I'm going tell you *everything* ..."

Skeppy.

All of a sudden it makes sense.

Pity. He hates pity, but at that moment Tommy still feels it anyway—not for Bad, but for his friend. How long has he had the Sick? How bad do his hands shake? Is he in pain? Does his voice crack—

Tommy leaves. He slams the EXIT door open. Before it closes completely, he can hear the last of Bad's whispered, broken words. They fade off, and Tommy focuses entirely on escaping. He doesn't know where he's going to go, but anywhere is better than *here*.

He's running down another hallway when he first hears a... *really* loud noise in the distance. The sound travels like a shockwave, and the walls start to rumble at the force of it. Tommy freezes and covers his ears until the sound starts to fade off. What was *that*? Could it be

—? No, nobody is coming for him. Why would they? Even if he escaped because of Bad, he still led Dream right to the Animal Army. Dream knows everything about them.

Tommy bursts out of whatever building he was in and into the open air. There are more loud noises, and he even hears a few growls from a gun, but he keeps running. He knows he's closer to the checkpoint once he spots a long road with houses. Unlike the first time he was here though, he sees actual people. People who aren't Last Men. He hears yelling from humans who rush into their houses. He sees slamming doors and window curtains pulling tightly shut.

He smells the smoke before he sees it. It's a giant cloud that rises farther and farther into the sky. There's no reason why the Last Men would do this themselves. Tommy is about to run to the gate. He's going to slip past *whoever* is trying to break in — or out — but then he hears footsteps... familiar footsteps. They aren't Dream's, but he knows the Man who makes them. Tommy ducks into the shadow of the building next to him. He slams a hand over his mouth and tries to still his breaths.

"I know you're here," Punz calls out, "and whoever helped you escape is a real pain in our asses." Tommy can hear the shift of a gun strap as Punz steps closer. Is he bluffing? How does he *know*? Should he run? No, he *can't*. There's no way he would make it. His leg is too fucked up to outrun Punz. "...Try to run away, and I'll shoot you," Punz continues as if he can read Tommy's mind. Shock falls over him. He knows he shouldn't be surprised, but he still is. Dream would *never* risk killing him. But Punz? He always carries that blankness in his eyes — as if he couldn't care less about hybrids, or Last Men, or— or any of this. Why?

Tommy presses further down against the wall right before Punz' boots step into view. Tommy knows he's going to get caught, and there's nothing he can do. He figures that if he *is* going to die, he might as well do as much damage as possible. He's ready to jump and sink his teeth into Punz like he really is an animal, but before he can, he sees the blur of another person.

Something— *someone*, is running up behind Punz, and they're approaching fast. Their footsteps pound against the gravel. Punz turns around and aims his gun. "Who the hell—!" he begins to say, but the figure slams their head— *no, their horns*, into Punz' head, and he falls over in a silent heap. Tommy sits with his back against the wall. Did that... just happen? Tubbo... *Tubbo* his brain catches up.

"Tubbo?" he chokes out.

"It's me," Tubbo says as he pulls down his hood, and there's a grin on his face wilder than Tommy's ever seen before. Tommy scrambles up from the wall right as Tubbo slams into him. It hurts, but he couldn't care less. A pair of arms wrap around Tommy, and his eyes shut tight as he melts into the hug. Tubbo is here. He's actually here.

"How—?"

Tubbo lets go and taps a finger against his nose. "Smell," he explains.

Tommy nods, and then he looks back over at Punz. He didn't know what he expected, but the Man still lies on the ground unconscious. "You actually knocked out Punz..."

“Well, I wasn’t about to let anyone else hurt you,” he says, and his eyes trace Tommy’s face.

Tommy suddenly hears someone else. They burst out from behind one of the buildings. It’s Ranboo. He’s gasping wildly, and when he spots them his face flashes from anger to relief. “Tommy! You’re— oh god, what did they *do* to you?” There’s a crossbow in his hand, but he puts it on the ground without a second thought and reaches a hand out unsurely. Tommy doesn’t even hesitate before he wraps Ranboo in a hug just like he did with Tubbo. They’re here. They’re really here. “And *you*,” Ranboo says as he lets go and looks over at Tubbo. “You idiot! I was so worried! Why did you run off without me? Why don’t you even have a weapon?!”

Tubbo pushes his coat up with one hand to reveal a knife. The other hand goes up to the back of his neck. He looks guilty, but Ranboo envelops him in a hug before he can respond. They break apart a few seconds later and Tommy stares at them. He still doesn’t understand.

“Why - why are you guys here?”

Tubbo frowns, and for a moment, he looks incredibly confused. It fades quickly, and then he grins as he meets Tommy’s eyes. The wildness in them is back. “You’re our family, Tommy,” he says as if it’s as simple as that. “*My family.*”

“Yeah,” Ranboo echoes.

Family.

Family.

Tommy tests the word out. It’s one that used to bring him happiness, but now, all it brings is pain. Sam was his family. He was Tommy’s entire world, and then he was gone. Every time he thinks of Sam, every time he’s reminded of him, Tommy still feels like he’s dying. It’s a pain he doesn’t think will ever go away. He still doesn’t know how he feels about the word, but— but Tubbo and Ranboo look at him like he’s *worth* something.

Dream was wrong.

He was wrong about *everything*.

“You’re really here... you really came,” Tommy whispers again.

“Course we did,” Tubbo says.

“Always,” Ranboo finishes.



Wilbur watches Technoblade light another firework and aim it at the nearest Last Man. It spins in a wide arc, colors wild but dim in the daylight until it finally sputters out. Wilbur's own hands clench around his crossbow. *Seven days*. It took them an entire week to put together a plan. It took them an entire week to travel far enough to find this place. Wilbur doesn't want to imagine what could have happened to Tommy in that time. He doesn't want to think about how he failed to keep the promise he made to himself.

Quackity leads the rest of the Animal Army members through the gate. They shoot arrows and fireworks at anything flamable, and use their swords to stab Last Men who scream and try to fire their guns off.

“It- it’s the Blood God!”

“Why is he here?!”

“Fucking shoot them already!”

“We- we can’t fight the Blood God!”

“Where is the General?!”

The Last Men’s screams echo in shock, fear, and pain. Technoblade’s boar helmet is back over his face, but Wilbur can see the way his eyes glint underneath it. He’s angry. Wilbur knows he is, because he’s angry too. He doesn’t care how many people he has to kill. Dream fucked up the second he decided to hurt Tommy. Wilbur is almost surprised by himself. He’s never felt hate this strongly — not since Last Men killed his mom. Is this what it means to be the Blood God, or does it mean something more — the fact that this time Technoblade is using his power to *rescue* a hybrid rather than kill one? Wilbur doesn’t know.

The firework plan is going, well, better than he thought it would. They’ve managed to not only get inside Dream’s... whatever this place is, they’ve also made significant progress too. That’s when Wilbur hears another Man scream, “Get the tanks!” Tanks. Dream has *tanks*, because of course he does. He’s a General. He’s *the* General. They need to hurry. None of them stand a chance if even one tank is brought to the fight. The only reason they’re winning right now is because the Last Men didn’t know they were coming.

“Who the hell are you guys?!” another of the Last Men screams. He’s wearing a black jacket and a white headband, and he’s flanked by a few other Men who hide behind buildings. He seems important, but he’s not Dream. They still haven’t found Dream yet.

“My name is Wilbur Soot! And this, as you already know, is the Blood God! Surrender now, and we won’t kill any more of you! We’re here to rescue a raccoon hybrid!” The Last Man with the headband is clearly surprised by the words, but he still raises his gun. Wilbur aims his crossbow, but then a voice speaks.

“Hold your fire!”

“Yes, General,” the Last Man with the headband says in surprise. He lowers his gun not a moment later, and every Last Man around them follows.

Wilbur has never met the Man that walks onto the battlefield, but he knows it's Dream even without his title. He's wearing a pale white mask with a black smiley face drawn on it. His clothes are dark, and a green cloak covers him. There's an axe in his hand, but he doesn't raise it. His voice has left everything frozen — as if he can control time itself.

“Wilbur Soot,” Dream addresses, “I’ve been following your work for some time now... and *Technoblade*.”

“Dream,” Technoblade states dully. “Where is Tommy?”

Dream lets out a short, emotionless laugh. His face is covered by his mask, but underneath it, Wilbur knows there's a festering kind of anger. “You disappeared for a few months,” Dream begins, completely ignoring the question, “but I never would have thought I'd see you here — on the same side as a bunch of hybrid sympathizers. We could have made history together, you know. You could have discovered the Cure with me.”

It's those words that connect the pieces together in Wilbur's brain. He didn't think — he didn't *want* to think it was true, but this confirms it. The bandages. The flinching. Fuck, the *scars*. Wilbur's finger lands on the trigger of his crossbow. It shakes. He's going to kill him — where is Tommy? — *he's going to kill him*.

“Let me make this clear, Dream,” Technoblade begins, and there's more emotion in it than he's ever heard before. “I'm no longer a Last Man. After tonight, I will no longer be the Blood God either. I left that life behind me the day I banished myself.”

Dream shakes his head. “Look at you, the once-great Blood God, reduced to nothing because of a single hybrid. You're the reason why we're going to be wiped out by a *mutation*. I can agree with you that Tommy is special. There's no other hybrid like him, but he's nothing compared to the entire human race. If not for the fact that he holds some key to our survival, we wouldn't be here.”

The words make Wilbur sick. He thinks of the day Phil brought Tubbo to them. He thinks of the day he met Tommy. “No. They're *better* than us. They're the good part of us... Nature doesn't want us back, Dream. If this is what it takes to keep humanity alive, I'm more than willing to let her wipe us all out.”

“Then you've killed us all,” Dream states coldly. He raises his axe towards Technoblade. It's a challenge. Wilbur realizes it for what it's for: he's done talking. They're done talking.

“Blood for the Blood God,” Technoblade chants as raises his sword thirsty for blood and propels himself forward.

“Protect the General!” the Last Man with the headband screams, and the battle resumes. Wilbur aims his crossbow and shoots the Man right in his shoulder, and he screams as he hits the ground. He can barely hear anything over the sound of guns firing and arrows splitting. The rumble of machines - of *tanks* , begins somewhere in the distance. Technoblade's sword clashes against Dream's axe as they come together and break apart.

“—bur! Wilbur!”

Wilbur can barely hear the voice, but he searches frantically. “Wilbur!” it yells again, and *it’s Tubbo*. The boy suddenly barrels out from the side of a building. Ranboo and—and *Tommy* are behind him. They found *Tommy*. He’s okay. He’s *safe*. Tubbo is holding their hands as they start to run across the street to reach him. There’s relief in their eyes, and they’re too distracted to see the Last Man aiming his gun at them. Ranboo won’t be able to shoot in time.

Wilbur doesn’t make a sound. His crossbow is unloaded, but he knows what he has to do. He can barely even think before he runs to get between them and the gun. Pain explodes in his side — a burning, scorching thing, and he knows he was successful. The pain worsens to the point that it’s all he can feel for a few seconds. His ears ring, and he shakes as he tries to focus.

“—bur!...”

“—can’t...”

“—bullet... side...”

Wilbur opens his eyes, and the world comes back in a rush. He’s lying against Tubbo, and he can feel the way the boy’s hands shake as they hold him off the ground. “Wilbur?” Tubbo pleads.

Ranboo is holding onto Wilbur’s arm like he thinks he might disappear. He doesn’t say anything, but he looks down at him desperately.

Tommy—*Tommy* is kneeling beside him too. He looks awful. He looks like he’s been through hell. There are bruises all over his face and arms — dark red and blue in the shape of fingers, and one of his eyes is nearly sealed shut. Tommy doesn’t pay any attention to them though. His eyes are on Wilbur, wide and full of fear. Tears fall over his bruised cheeks. “Wilbur—” he sobs, “—he’s awake! Wilbur! Please, say some- say something!”

“Tommy, ” Wilbur manages to grit out, “I’m so- so glad you’re—”

“—Shut- shut up! You’re the one who nearly got shot!” Wilbur looks down at his side — the one still burning with pain. There’s a hand holding a piece of fabric over it: Tubbo’s hand, but there’s no bullet hole. It missed him. The gun missed.

Wait. “The Last Man— Dream—” Wilbur gasps and he jerks to stand up. He can’t just *lie* here.

“—No, stop moving!” Tubbo yells, but Wilbur ignores him. He groans at the surge of pain, but it’s not nearly as bad as he thought it’d be. After a few seconds, he manages to pull himself to his feet with the boys’ help, and his vision clears. Wilbur sees the Last Man who tried to shoot him — an arrow sticking out of his chest, and he realizes what happened. There’s a crossbow on the ground. The one Ranboo was holding.

Wilbur looks away from it, and he sees Technoblade bring his sword down against Dream’s axe.

Dream crumbles to the ground, and his mask cracks into a million pieces that fall around him. He can't even move before Technoblade places a sword against his throat.

Tommy watches Dream tilt his throat into the sword's tip. His heart crashes, and he finds himself shaking uncontrollably. Dream's mask is gone, and underneath it isn't a monster. It's a man — the face of a young man.

Technoblade pushes his sword further against Dream's throat, but he freezes at the sound of someone screaming.

“*Dream!*” Tommy recognizes the voice. It's George. He still has those circles on his face, but they're pulled up onto his forehead now, lenses cracked and unusable. He's holding up another Last Man wearing a headband — the one Wilbur shot. “Don't kill him — please! Don't —” George begs. His voice is hoarse and full of panic. The Last Man he's holding up looks like he can barely move, but he reaches for a knife in his belt. His eyes are like two pools of fire.

“—No! Sapnap, George, stand down now!” Dream screams back, but his eyes never move away from Technoblade's. “Do it,” he breathes out. His voice is low, but not low enough for Tommy's ears to miss it. “Finish this!” For the first time ever, Tommy sees Dream's expression clearly. He looks angry, and that's not surprising. No, it's how his expression shifts to something else for just a moment.

He's scared.

Dream is *scared*.

Tommy thought he finally understood. He thought he understood *everything*. Men turned evil. Men turned good. Technoblade who never asked for his forgiveness. Bad who begged for it. He realizes now that there's still so much he's missing. The world is so much more complicated than he ever thought it was.

I've done everything in the name of love.

Tommy stares at the grief in George and Sapnap's eyes, and his heart twists. Who doesn't? Technoblade raises his blade up, but before he brings it down he looks over. If Sapnap's eyes were fire, Technoblade's are ice. He's ready to strike down Tommy's greatest nightmare — his biggest fear, but he's not doing it for vengeance or hate or greed. Tommy couldn't bring himself to understand at the time, but now he does.

He hears Technoblade's words again: *I left that life behind me the day I banished myself.* Technoblade kept the truth from him, but he didn't do it to hurt him. Something made Technoblade want to change. Something made him want to stop. The ice melts, just a little, as

he meets Tommy's eyes, and that's when Tommy knows. His breath catches. It was him. He's the reason why.

Technoblade stands in front of him now, and he waits for Tommy to decide. He's giving him the choice of whether Dream lives or dies.

Tommy hates Dream. He hates Dream *so fucking much*. He used to think of this day so, so many times. Dream claims what he did was for humanity, because if he controls Tommy, he controls the future. Tommy knows that's not the truth — at least not entirely. Dream likes seeing him weak and powerless. He likes hurting him.

For just a moment, Tommy looks over at Dream and remembers *everything* he's done to him — both him and Bad.

"Tommy," Dream breathes out. Technoblade pushes his blade forward at the same time Wilbur places an arm out. Tommy still expects Dream to yell, or make him feel guilty, or— or *something*. None of those things happen. Dream doesn't do anything. He doesn't speak again. He just stares with wide eyes no longer hidden behind his mask, and then Tommy sees it:

Dream's expression shifts into an emotion that looks so wrong, so startlingly human on him. There's something else in it too that Tommy is familiar with: expectation.

He expects Tommy to say yes, and why wouldn't he? He has every right to kill Dream for what he's done. He should *want* to kill Dream, but the thought makes Tommy feel nothing like he'd imagined he would. He doesn't feel powerful, or glad, or relieved by it. He feels hate, and dread, and— and *pity* for the two Last Men who seem to care for Dream more than he cares for them. Tommy doesn't feel free. He thinks that's something that happened without him even realizing.

Tommy glances around the entire battlefield. There's fear in George's eyes. Pain in. Sapnap's. Hatred in the Last Men's.

He doesn't need to meet Wilbur, or Tubbo, or Ranboo's to know what's in them.

Tommy finally lets himself look at the rest of the Animal Army. Their weapons are still held up, but when they met his eyes, none of that hatred is for him. There's concern, and fear, and relief, and joy. They're all bruised, and bloody, and clearly exhausted, but they're here for him. All of them: Niki. Jack. Puffy. Fundy. Wolf. Foolish. Charlie. Eret. Phil. *Quackity*. The last time Tommy saw him, he was about to betray Wilbur. He doesn't know if it even happened, or if Wilbur ever found out. He doesn't think it matters now. Quackity is here, and that has to mean something.

None of them tell him what to do.

Tommy looks back at Technoblade, and he shakes his head. It's easy, and yet so difficult.

Technoblade's eyes harden, but then he wrenches his sword away from Dream's throat. "The only reason I'm not killin' you is for everythin' we used to have before," he states, and

Tommy doesn't think he's talking about being Last Men. "And because I can't bring myself to do it in front of Tommy."

Dream grits his teeth, but he doesn't move or try to get up. He stares at Tommy again, and then his head just falls against the ground. Wilbur's hand finally drops at that. "Thank you-thank you—" George gasps in relief as he and Sapnap stumble over, but Technoblade turns his back and ignores them. The rest of the Animal Army are grouped up nearby. The rest of the Last Men hide under cover with guns in their hands. Nobody shoots. Nobody speaks. Nobody gets in his way of Technoblade.

The battle is over.

Technoblade's boots stride across the ground as he approaches, and Tommy waits until the man stops a few feet from him. Letting go of Wilbur with a gentle movement, he doesn't even hesitate before he's running forward and burying his head into Technoblade's cloak. "—Kid?" Technoblade asks with a huff of air, and he can hear the surprise in the man's voice.

Tommy turns his head and stares up at Technoblade. His hair is a little longer now — almost entirely black as the pink in it fades. Tommy can tell the man is exhausted by the way he's standing, but he's here. "Thank you, Techno," Tommy says, and his voice is steady. He knows everyone is watching. Every member and every Man. He doesn't care.

Techno looks like he doesn't know what to say, but he brings his arms down and wraps them around him as hesitantly as ever. A hand settles against the back of Tommy's head, and it stays there. Tommy closes his eyes at the touch, and even here, with Dream only a few feet away — he feels safe.

It's the sound of footsteps that make him jerk his head up. Punz wobbles out onto the street. There's a huge bump on his head that's bleeding, and he looks confused. He looks like he barely knows where he is. His eyes narrow in on Tommy, and then they flit just past him. Tommy ducks behind Techno, but Punz doesn't try to attack him. He watches as the Man freezes. "P... Purpled?" he calls out softly, and there's— there's vulnerability in his voice. It doesn't even sound like Punz.

The rest of the Animal Army members' eyes are wide as they look towards who Punz called out to — to Wolf. His eyes are blank, but his face is pale. He looks like he's just seen a ghost. Is that Wolf's real name? How does Punz know it?

"Punz...?" Wolf— *Purpled*, echoes back.

Punz' eyes widen, and it looks like he's about to say something more, but he doesn't get the chance. A noise rumbles loud and machine-like — one that Tommy has been ignoring for a while — and not a second later something black and green comes surging around the corner of the street and starts heading right for them. It looks like a square with a giant cylinder on the top. Tommy has never seen anything like it before, but he knows it's bad news. "What the fuck is *that*?!" he blurts out.

The rest of the Animal Army start to yell.

Techno is silent, but his hand stays protectively on Tommy's back.

"It's- it's a tank," Ranboo answers fearfully.

"Holy shit, they have tanks!" Tubbo exclaims, and only he could manage to sound *excited* about it.

"I think it's time to fucking leave!" Quackity screams from behind them all, and he looks over at Wilbur expectantly.

Wilbur orders them to retreat.

Tommy knows Dream's eyes are on him as they do. He's hurt, tired, and hungry. It's just like the last time he ran, but this time, it's different. Dream will never hurt him again, because he's not alone.

Tommy never thought he'd have a family after Sam died. He didn't want one— no, he convinced himself he was better off alone. Now he knows better. For Sam, and for Techno, and for the Animal Army he'd do it all over again. There's so much he's learned, and so much more he still has yet to find the answers to: about Wilbur and the Animal Army, about Punz and Purpled, about Techno and Dream, about the Cure and Bad's sick friend — Skeppy.

For now, there's one thing Tommy knows for certain: Family is *always* worth it.

Chapter End Notes

CW: abuse, emotional manipulation, dehumanization, implied interrogation/torture, description of bruises & scars, implied experimentation, implied past suicidal thoughts, brief description of someone getting shot, brief description of head injury

Thank you to everyone who's enjoyed this fic (and whoever else may in the future)! This au is really special to me and it's been so much fun writing/sharing it.

Feel free to leave a comment (even just a POG)!

Update: I planned to continue this au, and I did! I ended up writing two more chapters.

but this, this wasn't the end of their story

Chapter Notes

Me: I'll write one more extra chapter, not too long

Also me: 24,000+ words later...

Yeah, so welcome to the last two chapters. There's backstory. There's recovery. There's even Plot.

I've changed the fic back to unfinished until I post the last one in a week.

I'm very excited to finally be able to share the completion of this au. Hope you guys enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“—ommy, wake up.”

Tommy’s eyes snap open, and he scrambles to sit up. *Dream*—

“Woah, it’s okay! It’s just me, Tommy. It’s Tubbo.” Tommy shudders out a breath. Tubbo. *Tubbo* is crouching above him. Tommy can see in the dark, and it makes the curl of Tubbo’s horns and the way his ears fold forward all the more apparent. It’s him. Tommy breathes in again, and this time he smells the world outside. There’s star in the sky, and wind that crawls against his skin. He’s at the Animal Army’s camp. He’s safe. He’s not *there*.

Tommy pushes himself up off the ground, and his brain stutters back to life completely. He’s half-lying in a sleeping bag surrounded by the rest of the Animal Army. There’s a few horses tied up to a couple of trees, and in the distance, the dim light of a fire catches his eyes. Tommy looks down — he’s wearing the same, dirty clothes he was in before, the shoes Phil gave him, and a winter coat, but underneath it almost every inch of him is wrapped up in bandages — and then he looks back up.

Tubbo is still here. His face is open, posture relaxed, but there’s a hint of worry in his eyes now. It’s irritating. It’s also insanely comforting, but Tommy would never, *ever* admit that. Tubbo is in different clothes now too. He’s ditched his overalls for a plain black t-shirt with faded letters that spell *Oracle Garden*, whatever the fuck *that* means, and a pair of sweatpants. His boots are still on, but the laces are strung across the ground like he couldn’t find the time to tie them.

Tommy swallows. “What is it, Tubs?”

Tubbo sits down on the ground next to him, tucking his knees close to his chest. His movements are sluggish, but he smiles softly. “Wil told me to wake you up. You’ve been

asleep for like two days.”

“Wha- two days?!” Tommy opens his mouth to scream more, but one of the members shifts a few feet away. It hurts, but he lowers his voice to a whisper. “Why didn’t anyone wake me up?!” Tommy remembers collapsing onto the ground, hearing Wilbur’s pained gasps as he held his side, someone — maybe Techno? — trying to help him, and then exhaustion and relief and — and then he doesn’t know. It’s weird. The gap in time freaks him out more than a little bit.

Tubbo folds his arms around his legs. “Well, sometimes you wouldn’t really wake up, and when you did you weren’t awake. Not really. I almost thought you died.” He lets out a short laugh, but it isn’t funny. There’s nothing funny about it.

Tommy frowns for a moment before he reaches a hand out and waits. He still isn’t used to the feeling of their fingers linking, and he doesn’t know if he ever will be. “I’m okay, Tubs. Really. Better than okay,” Tommy tries to reassure. Tubbo takes a moment to look over his face, his eyes stopping on the bandage below his cheek, and then he nods. His movement is sluggish again.

Tommy takes a moment to look around. He can hear the whistle of wind through grass, and the drone of crickets, and the ever-present stillness of the night. His ears twitch, and a chitter rises up— Tommy clears his throat. “What’s been going on then? Is everyone sleeping?”

Tubbo gently tugs on his hand, and soon he’s being led through the camp. Tommy’s leg still aches, but they go slow enough that he doesn’t stumble. He can feel the bruises that trail up and down him, and his face still hurts, but he resists the urge to touch the bandages. Tommy doesn’t even want to think about why they’re there. “...It’s pretty much been quiet ever since we got back,” Tubbo explains, and his tail flutters from side-to-side as they walk. “Wilbur thinks Dream is waiting in the shadows to attack us. Technoblade, umm, well he doesn’t. Everyone has mostly been sleeping or doing different things around the camp.”

Tommy doesn’t know what to say. It’s good news, but it’s also confusing. He looks down at one of the members wrapped up in a sleeping bag. It’s Charlie. Tommy can tell by the little giraffe ears on his hood. He doesn’t stir even as they step right next to his head, and Tommy suddenly realizes just how *exhausted* everyone is. He stares at Tubbo again. That’s why. Tubbo is exhausted. Tommy can’t help but feel a little guilty.

The soft nicker of a horse hits Tommy’s ears, and he searches for that familiar brown coat. “Carl,” he whispers desperately as he stumbles over to the group of horses he saw before. One of the horses raises his head and looks over. Tommy shuffles a little closer. Carl. It’s Carl. “I’m so glad you’re okay,” Tommy gasps out. Carl lets out a breath of air and swings his head closer.

Tubbo laughs softly. “I swear he knew you were in trouble.”

Tommy grins, and he shakily places a hand against the horse’s snout.

“—miss the most isn’t even...”

His ear perk up at the voice.

“...so true.” That’s Quackity.

“—sister... made those for me when I was little.” Foolish.

What are they talking about?

Tubbo and he say goodbye to Carl and walk closer to the fire. It becomes clear who was talking before. Quackity, Foolish, Wilbur, and Niki are sitting in a semicircle. All of them are wearing warm clothes and holding their hands out towards the fire. It’s chilly out, but not bad enough to make you shiver too much. Tommy knows that’s going to change soon.

Techno is here too, but he’s sitting further away. He’s no longer wearing his cloak, crown, or helmet. He’s no longer the Blood God. In fact, with his dark, choppy hair and regular clothes, he looks no different than anybody else. Tommy breathes a little slower. Whatever truce was made between him and the rest of the Animal Army is apparently holding up. “What kind—” Quackity starts to say, but he cuts himself off when hears their footsteps. Everyone looks over.

“Hey guys. Guess who I brought?” Tubbo announces anyway.

“Tommy!” Niki greets warmly.

Wilbur stumbles up from his spot. He tries to hide a wince, but Tommy sees it anyway. It’s even easier now without his usual black and white face-paint. He hasn’t worn it in a while. Tommy also knows where the bandage would be if he could see it — the same spot Tubbo’s hands pressed down on. Wilbur’s cloak must be hiding it from view. “Tommy...” Wilbur states, but his voice comes out all breathy. A little unsure. “How’re you doing?— Wait just a second, I’ll get you some food.”

“...Thanks,” Tommy says quietly, watching for a moment as Wilbur starts to dig through his bag. He turns his attention back on everyone else.

Niki looks relieved, and there’s a small smile on her face now.

Foolish smiles too, but there’s something different about it. Tommy doesn’t know what. “Glad you’re awake,” he states as he meets Tommy’s eyes, and it sounds genuine enough.

Quackity won’t even look at him.

Techno stares.

Tommy keeps his expression neutral. His cheek still burns, and Wilbur’s right. His stomach aches too. He doesn’t want to seem ungrateful though, especially not after they worked so hard to rescue him. “I’m okay guys. Don’t worry about me,” he says as he shuffles over to the fire. Tubbo follows him, and they sit down on the ground together. After a moment, Tommy feels their hands disconnect, but he doesn’t mind. He knows this isn’t going to be the last time. “What were you guys talking about?” Tubbo asks curiously.

“Oh, just Pre-crumble stuff,” Foolish admits, but now he sounds *too* normal.

Wilbur finds whatever he was looking for and starts walking over. Tommy looks up as he slowly holds out a bunch of granola bars. Without saying anything this time, he takes them, rips the wrapping off one of bars and tears off a huge bite. It’s chewy and... nutty. Tommy continues to eat. He stares at everyone for a few seconds before it becomes too much and he looks back at the fire. “Tommy...” Quackity starts to say, but then he grimaces and his words fade. He looks like he’s in pain.

Techno falling to his knees, eyes closed tight.

Oh, so that’s what this is about. Tommy understands now. It’s about the betrayal.

“—I heard you guys,” he blurts out before he can take it back. Quackity’s eyes widen. Foolish’s expression twists. Wilbur — about to sit down — suddenly tenses up. Niki stops smiling. Techno is still. Tubbo shuffles nervously next to him.

Wilbur shakes his head, and his look is something pleading. “Tommy, it’s okay, you don’t have to talk about it—”

“—No, Wilbur, I want to. Everyone is acting fucking *weird* and it’s pissing me off.” Nobody says anything, so Tommy continues. He feels weak, not entirely sure he could even stand up right now, but his voice comes out strong. He knows what he wants to say. “I heard you talking about how you were gonna kill Techno, so I—I ran, and I tried to find Wilbur.”

Quackity closes his eyes, and then he opens them and whispers, “Is that how...?”

Tommy nods, but he doesn’t want to talk about *that*. “You didn’t do it, though,” he says instead.

Quackity stands up from his seat. “Tommy, that’s only because I thought I could get something out of him!” he admits, and then he looks over at Techno warily. The man still hasn’t moved, but his gaze isn’t focused on Quackity. It’s on Tommy. “...I was just so-so *frustrated*. Wilbur wouldn’t fucking *listen* to me, and—”

Wilbur closes the space between them and grabs onto Quackity’s cloak. He brings their faces together, and he raises a hand. “—No, you wouldn’t fucking *listen* to *me*! I *told* you—!”

“—Stop it!” Niki yells, and she places herself between the two of them. Tommy has never seen her angry. His ears flatten at the tone. He tenses up, and the all too familiar feeling of wanting to run surfaces. “This isn’t about either of you. It’s about *Tommy*.” Wilbur and Quackity fall silent. The hand twisted into Quackity’s shirt lets go, and they slowly back off of each other, both suddenly interested in the ground.

Wilbur looks up a few seconds later, and his eyes — it’s a sudden, overwhelming thought, but Tommy almost thinks he’s going to cry. “You’re right, Niki,” Wilbur agrees, and he lets out a shaky sigh as he sits back down.

Quackity exhales sharply. He doesn't sit like Wilbur, but he does wrap his arms around himself and slouch down. "Yeah, she is. What can I even *say* now? It's not an excuse, but... I was so fucking *wrong*. Technoblade wasn't even the one that hurt you in the end. It was *me*."

Wilbur scoffs.

"The *point*," Foolish cuts in, "is that we made a mistake and you paid for it."

Quackity slouches down even further. Tommy can see the moment he closes his heart off. "—No. No, Foolish. I convinced everyone it needed to be done. I'm the one who made sure everyone was out of the way. It's my fault and mine alone." His sharp words are back, but this time they're directed at no one but himself.

"Stop! I *chose* to follow your lead!" Foolish's voice begins to rise.

"Because you trusted me to make the right call!" Tommy finally starts to connect the dots, and he realizes what really happened that night. Quackity was angry, so he made a plan. He told Foolish the very same night he overheard, and everyone else on Quackity's side: Eret, Fundy, Wolf, and Charlie, they listened to him. Tommy doesn't think they knew the plan, or at least not all of it. It's why Eret wasn't on guard duty; why he left him alone. It's why Dream was able to do what he did. It's why Quackity is trying to take all of the blame right now and not all of them.

Tommy expects more yelling. He tenses up for the fight. "—It's perfectly understandable if you don't want to forgive either of them," Niki interrupts, voice firm and reassuring, as if she thinks Tommy is too afraid to say otherwise.

Tommy takes a deep breath, and he looks around. He thinks over everything that's happened. He wishes he were *more* angry, but he's not. He's just relieved. Quackity still won't sit down. He won't look at anyone, and there's the same hatred and guilt and fear that have always been in his eyes, only different. Foolish exudes a nervous kind of quiet, and he glances up at Tommy before looking away again. How long have they waited to tell him this? What do they think he's going to say? What would they do if he never forgave them? "It's..." Tommy begins, and everyone is listening. "...It's not promises or words that prove a person, it's their actions, okay? You *saved* me. You all did, and that—that *means* something. It's enough. Besides, I forgave Techno." Tommy gestures towards the man. "How's it fair to forgive him and not the both of you?"

"Tommy's right, you know." Techno's voice is neutral, but his words give away how he feels.

"That's— that's..." Quackity sputters, but there's nothing he can say now. Tommy knows he's won.

"Just—" Tubbo yawns, "—accept it."

Foolish catches Tommy's eyes again and this time they stay on him. "You're really forgiving us?"

"Yeah," Tommy slowly nods, "yeah I am."

Quackity looks up. His eyes are dark, and the fire flickers in them when he meets Tommy's gaze. Any other time, and the expression might have scared him, but: "Thank you, Tommy," Quackity whispers, and there's no pity in his voice. No attempt at manipulating Tommy's feelings. He means it. Tommy knows he does. Foolish too. They're his family.

"No problem, Big Q."

Quackity's face sours. "...Big Q?"

"What? Don't like it?"

"No, that's not—" Quackity tries to backtrack, and that's exactly what Tommy expects him to do. He grins. This is better. This reminds him of hanging around Quackity at the Animal Army's hideout before everything went wrong. He was nervous back then, so scared of making a mistake. It didn't matter though. If Quackity couldn't make him laugh, he always managed to make Tommy smile.

"—Then from now on I'm gonna call you Big Q!"

Wilbur can't hold it in for very long, and he's suddenly falling against the ground. His laughter is just as contagious as Phil's, and Tommy can't help but join in. Soon everyone else does to. The sound fills the quiet, dead air of night with something alive. Techno even chuckles, and things finally sit right with Tommy at the sound. He still thinks this might be a dream, but he's starting to believe it less and less.

Quackity pulls his hood over head to hide his face, and his mouth curls into a snarl. "What's so fucking funny?!"

"N-nothing... *Big Q*," Wilbur answers, and then he falls back down on the ground again.

Tommy bursts into more laughter at that. It feels bright and warm. It feels *good*. He doesn't even care that it makes his face hurt. "Oh my god. I think I'm dying now," Tubbo manages to groan out. He leans his head down, but the second it hits Tommy's shoulder, he tenses. He pulls his head back up, expression unreadable, but Tommy knows the kind of hesitation in it. Tubbo thinks he's made a mistake.

Tommy takes another bite out of his granola bars and rolls his eyes. He nudges Tubbo's shoulder a second later and nods. Tubbo expression relaxes, and a moment later he untenses and lets his head drop completely. Luckily, his horns aren't big enough to get in the way yet. Tommy hopes they won't.

"Man," Wilbur sighs, "I haven't laughed like that since—"

"—Could you guys be any louder?" an annoyed voice suddenly cuts Foolish off, and everyone's laughter fades. Tommy looks over as Wolf... as *Purpled* walks out of the darkness and into the light of the fire. There's bags under his eyes, and his hair is messy. He looks like he hasn't slept in days. Tommy would normally relate, but apparently he's actually been asleep for most of the past two days.

“P- Wolf,” Wilbur greets, and he tries to catch his slip. It’s clear he’s not quick enough though, because a grimace passes over Purpled’s face. Tommy remembers what happened. Does he not like them saying that name? Why? Has he even told anyone how he knows Punz? Tommy has a feeling he hasn’t. He spots the chain attached to Wolf’s neck — the one that holds those two metals things on its end. Now, he knows they aren’t just a type of clothing. They mean something.

“Did we wake you up?” Techno asks gruffly.

“No. Wasn’t sleeping anyway,” Wolf denies, and then he walks over and sits in one of the empty spots closer to Techno than any of the other members. His gaze passes over them, and then it lands on Tommy. “Nice to see you up,” he says off-handedly, but Wolf is always kind of like that. Tommy nods awkwardly. “So... what was so funny a second ago?”

“ *Nothing*— ” Quackity hisses.

Wilbur cuts him off with a grin that looks way too smug. *Tommy* is the one who came up with the name, thank you very fucking much. “—Quackity has a new name: Big Q.”

Wolf’s eyebrows raise. “...Interesting. How do you feel about that, Big Q?”

“Oh for god’s sake! I give up,” Quackity groans and puts his head in his hands.

Wolf snickers under his breath. “Well, there’s worse names out there.”

Niki laughs softly, but then it falls and she turns a little more serious. “Before that we were talking about the Pre-crumble.” Tommy manages to finish the last bite of his granola bar. He starts to debate opening the next one while he waits for someone to say something. It sucks, but he doesn’t think he can eat another.

“...I was just telling everyone that sometimes I miss the little things more than the big ones, like the food I ate when I was a kid,” Quackity says, and he looks over at Foolish.

“Yeah, and I was talking about how my sister used to make Pop-Tarts for me when I was little. The brown-sugar cinnamon ones. I’d always eat them right before school, and my parents couldn’t stop me because she somehow managed to convince them,” Foolish grins, and it’s a soft thing. Tommy wakes up a little more at the story. He has a million questions: What are Pop-Tarts? How can sugar be brown? What is cinnamon? What is *school* ? but his brain stills on the word sister. Foolish has a sister... or — or at least he used to.

“Pop-Tarts?” Tubbo asks as he shifts his head to find a more comfortable position. If he’s surprised by what Foolish said, he doesn’t show it.

“You’ve *had* Pop-Tarts before, Tubbo.”

Tubbo yawns again and shoots a lazy look at Wilbur. “I have?”

“Yeah, they were kind of like Niki’s cakes.” Niki’s cakes?

“I miss making those,” Niki says, and there’s a hint of sadness in her voice.

“Oh, wait. Those were *so good*.”

“What the hell? Pop-Tarts aren’t like *cake*,” Quackity cuts in with a disgusted tone.

Wilbur’s contemplation twists into contempt. “How else am I supposed to describe them?!”

“Just say they’re sugary toast!”

“What?! No!”

“Actually, they’re pastries,” Techno suddenly interrupts.

Sugary... toast? Pastries? “ *What?* ”

“Oh, right. Tommy’s never had Pop-Tarts. So basically, they were this super good Pre-crumble *breakfast food*,” Foolish clearly emphasizes for the argument, “that people ate. Unfortunately, our stocks ran out a couple years ago. I bet you would’ve like them as much as Tubbo did.”

“Oh, pog,” Tommy replies.

“...All I’m saying,” Wolf begins after having listened to the conversation quietly, “is that Pop-Tarts definitely *aren’t* only eaten for breakfast.”

“I still think they’re more like cakes...” Niki says, resting her elbows on her leg, holding her chin up with her hands. "...but adding on to what Quackity said, the hard part is that food is always connected to people. I miss gathering around the table with my family. We’d all visit for Christmas, and there’d be like seventeen of us in the same house. It was crazy, but the fun kind of crazy.” Niki lists off a bunch of names that must be different kinds of food. Tommy doesn’t recognize any of them.

“Exactly,” Wilbur muses, slowly nodding his head. “Sometimes Phil...” and he pauses for a moment as if gathering the courage to continue, "...Phil and my mom would take me to this burger place. I’d always get the triple chocolate sundae and stuff my face with it. It was the best.”

Quackity lets out a soft laugh, but it’s not mocking. It’s not directed at Wilbur. No matter how much they fight, Tommy doesn’t think Quackity would ever laugh at something like this. “I’d always sneak out and go watch R-rated movies with my friends. Looking back on it, we were *so fucking* rude. I don’t know how we didn’t get kicked out. We’d throw popcorn everywhere and spill our drinks on the floor... if I could do it again I totally would.”

Tommy glances down. Tubbo’s eyes are shut, and his breathing is even now. He’s asleep. He’d probably talk about his dad if he wasn’t, because that’s just how it was: everyone had family. Some before the Great Crumble. Some even after. All of the Animal Army members... Where are their families now? Are they gone? Were they killed by Last Men. Did they get the Sick? What happened to Foolish’s sister, and Niki’s family; to Wilbur’s mom, and Quackity’s friends?

Sam— Tommy doesn't want to remember, *he doesn't want to remember*, but he does. Sam used to make his favorite foods all the time. He'd wake up so excited, the scent of baked apples and fresh deer meat on his nose... Tommy looks around. He knows everyone wants him to share something. They won't say it, but he knows.

"I can't," Tommy says, voice shaky, but someday... someday he thinks he might be able to. He wants to tell them about his dad. He wants to remember him without the sharp pain in his chest. Nobody seems mad at his refusal. If anything, they just look sad. They look like they understand, and they do, in a way.

"I get that," Wolf states. Tommy looks over at him, and he can feel everyone's shock. "When someone leaves, a part of you leaves with them. A part of you dies too, and it's only when they return that you suddenly feel a little more alive." Tommy doesn't know what to do other than nod. He's never talked about Sam, never even mentioned that he lost someone, and yet Wolf knows. He pulls the chain out from under his coat and holds up the metal things attached to its end. Punz. He's talking about Punz.

Wolf laughs, and there's some kind of bitter amazement in it. "I don't remember much about my— my brother, but he was the only family I ever knew. He was the kindest person I knew — and— and he's *alive*."

Punz. Punz is Wolf's *brother*. Tommy tries to imagine Punz the way Wolf described him, but it's impossible. Cold, dead eyes and condescending words. That's Punz. He's not kind. He's anything but kind. Tommy doesn't know if he can bring himself to believe he ever was, no matter what Wolf might say.

"Why did you think he died?" Wilbur asks hesitantly. Tommy almost thinks Wolf isn't going to reply, but then his shoulders drop. He seems to let go of something, and then he's speaking. There's pain in the past, Tommy thinks, but there's also relief too.

"...I was barely four when the Great Crumble happened, and the city I lived in was one of the first to get hit by the Wave. Punz— He tried his best to look after me, but we were out when the quarantine started, and after we got separated, I couldn't find him. I— I never saw him again after that, so what else was I supposed to think? I was just a kid and I had to survive all by myself. There were no rules, no laws after the military fell. At least, not until the Last Men were formed, and then what do I find out? He actually went and *became* one." Wolf slowly lets go of the metal things in his hand, and they fall back against his heart. His face is blank, but his words are angry and confused. Tommy wonders what "quarantine" means — how Punz and Purpled got separated. He's only ever heard about the Great Crumble. Never lived it. Now, he thinks again about what it would have been like: to be all alone, to have to survive without Sam there to protect him. Is that what makes someone to join up with the Last Men, losing everything? Tommy knows what that's like.

"What about the dog tags?" Techno asks curiously, and Wolf looks down at the metal things.

"Our names are engraved on them." Tommy can't read the letters, but he can imagine the thin lines. He wonders why they're called "dog tags" if people's names are on them and not dog's. "They were a reminder of everything I'd lost. At least, I thought they were. When I joined the Animal Army, I swore I'd leave the past behind. Hearing his voice again though, hearing him

say my name— my *real* name, and realizing everything he's done..." *Everything he's done to me.* Does Wolf even know? Tommy doesn't want to tell him.

"It's a lot," Wilbur finishes.

"Yeah, that's one way to put it."

"Well, none of us are expecting you to be perfectly fine," Quackity says with a shrug.

"And it's not your fault either," Niki adds.

"I know," Wolf replies, and he's more confident, more sure of himself than Tommy expected. He knows it's not his fault. He's already come to terms with what happened a long time ago.

"What about your name?" Tommy holds back a jump at the sudden voice— at Tubbo's voice in his ear. He looks down, and Tubbo's eyes are open. How long has he been awake?

Wolf looks surprised for a moment, but then his expression falls again. "What about it?"

"Do you not like it?" Tommy thinks it's kind of a blunt question, but Tubbo has never been one to hold back how he feels.

Wolf glances around, looking conflicted before his gaze settles on the fire. "No, it's not that. I guess... it's just something that might take time to get used to."

Tommy watches as Wolf begins to tell the rest of the members about the dog tags that he wears close to his heart, and the two names engraved on them. He wonders how two people once so close could have ended up so far apart: Purpled, who would protect a hybrid with his life, and Punz, who seems to care for nothing and no one but himself. Tommy knows what grief can do to a person — how love can lead you to do ugly things, things you never thought you could.

Tommy watches Wolf grimace at his name, and then he watches Purpled smile. He can't help but agree: these things take time.



Tommy wraps one of the blankets that Phil gave him around himself. It has some weird pattern on it, but the inside is soft. It's a cold night, but Tommy can't even feel it. He's with his family: Phil, Techno, and Wil. There's barely enough room for the four of them, but they all pile together onto Tommy's bed anyway.

Tommy starts to drift as he rests against Wilbur. He tries not to, but he does anyway. His room is dark, and the curtains are shut. It makes some part of him feel hidden. It makes him feel protected. Wilbur's hand is resting lightly on his back too. Tommy can feel a purr hesitantly crackle from his throat at the touch, and the words that resonate from—

Oh, right. He's supposed to be listening to Wil's story.

"—there was flour literally *everywhere*, and my mom gets home from work right in time to see it."

Phil cackles, but there's a displeased look on his face. "What were you even trying to do, Wil? You were four years old!"

"I didn't care! I was four years old and I was gonna bake a fucking birthday cake, Phil!"

Techno suddenly nods. His head is resting against the wall, arms tucked comfortably into the pocket of his hoodie. "I mean, he got pretty far."

" *What?* Techno, don't encourage him—!"

"— You're *damn* right I did. Anyway, as I was saying," Wilbur interrupts, and his hand presses gently against the nape of Tommy's neck. He stills at the touch. He waits for fingers to brush through his hair, but they never do. He waits for sharp words, but they never cut through him. Tommy continues to purr, but it's quieter, and it's different. It's warped—

"—Doing okay, Tommy?" Tommy's thoughts cut off. His purrs break apart. He looks at Techno, because *of course* he noticed. He always does. Wilbur's hand suddenly leaves like he was touching fire. Phil's eyes glint with anger, but not at him, *never* at him. *Fuck*—

Tommy sits up and backs away. He doesn't want to touch anyone. His heart is going crazy. He tries to calm down, but he *can't*. "Yeah, fine." None of them look convinced. Techno even raises an eyebrow. "Okay, so I'm not *fine*, but I am *okay*. I mean—I will be." Shit. That was *way* too much backtracking.

"Do you wanna talk about it?" Phil asks softly.

Tommy looks down at the bed and shakes his head. His bruises ache even though they shouldn't. He can still feel gentle, painful hands in his hair and words that make him feel so small and *afraid*— "Not—not really," he's gasping out, hands wringing into the blanket to ground himself to the present. He's *here*. "Just continue your story, Wil," he urges, but there's no please at the end. Tommy doesn't like that word. He doesn't like a lot of the things he used to, and it's stupid. Sure, it's only been a week since they've got back to the hideout, but it's still so fucking stupid. Sometimes he's fine, and sometimes he's the furthest thing from it.

Wilbur slowly nods, but he doesn't reach out like earlier. "Fuck off and give me your hand!" Tommy growls out, because the thought of Wilbur retreating like that makes his chest hurt. "It—it wasn't that. It was something else," Wilbur looks at him with so much understanding, and then he gently takes Tommy's hand back. Phil and Techno watch, and he knows they want to know more. They would burn the whole world if Tommy let them. He lies down against Wilbur again and focuses back on his voice.

"...Where was I? Oh, right. My mom gets home, and the second she walks inside I start absolutely bawling. There's flour *everywhere*. I think I'm screwed. I think that any second she's gonna start yelling, but then—then she scoops me up and starts *laughing*."

Phil smiles, but there's grief in his eyes. "That's Kristen for you."

"So, she wasn't mad?" Tommy hesitantly asks.

"No, not at all. I was too young to know any better, but even if I wasn't, she still wouldn't have been mad. My mom never would have hurt me. She cleaned the mess up, and then she helped me prank Phil." Tommy nods. He knows that's what it's *supposed* to be like. He used to expect kind words. He used to be fearless, because Sam *always* forgave him no matter what he did. He's only just starting to remember that feeling again.

"What was the prank?" Techno inquires.

Phil groans. "That one was so annoying. You even made *me* clean it up afterwards."

"We took the rest of the flour and balanced it on a cabinet door, and then when Phil opened it that night, it went everywhere *again*."

Wilbur smirks proudly. Tommy can practically see the flour falling on Phil's head, and it makes him snicker. "Your mom sounds really cool."

Wilbur nods, but the movement is a little more reserved now. "She was. She was amazing." Tommy still doesn't know how Kristen died, but... *Some of our families were slaughtered in cold blood. By Last Men...* he has a feeling he already knows. He knows enough. Some things are better left alone.

Silence falls over them for a moment. "...Pranks. That actually reminds me of someone," Techno drawls.

Phil grins. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. It was a long time ago, before the Great Crumble, actually."

"You were like seventeen, then?" Wilbur calculates. Tommy's eyes widen. Wait... Techno was basically his age when the Great Crumble happened? That's—he should have known, but Tommy never really thought about it. It's only been a week since they got back, and he wasn't going to ask. He doesn't think he ever *has* to know, because it doesn't matter. Even so, he can't help but be curious about Techno's past.

"Yup. I was still in high school back then."

"High school?" Tommy pronounces the word. He's never heard of it before—wait, he remembers hearing the word before. Foolish said it, but he never asked what it meant. It must be yet another Pre-crumble thing he doesn't know about.

"Well," Techno chuckles, and for some reason it sounds nervous. He doesn't hear him sound like that much anymore, and it reminds Tommy of the first time they ever met. "I guess there's some things you *didn't* miss out on. It was a place where kids go to learn about to world for outrageous amounts of money — not that that mattered much after the government fell. Not that I concerned myself much with whether the government was doin' well to begin with."

“What, were you some kind of *anarchist*? At *seventeen*?” Wilbur’s words are confusing. Anarchist? What does *that* mean? Tommy doesn’t even really know what the government was other than a group of people that ran the world. Sam told him they were bad, that they were slowly killing everything, and that’s why the Sick came. Techno must not have liked the government because of that.

“Pretty much.”

“Of fucking *course* you were! I don’t know why I’m even surprised.”

Phil cackles again. “Who reminded you of the pranks then? Someone from high school, I take it?”

Techno is quiet. “...If I’m bein’ honest, I don’t think I can explain this story without tellin’ you guys about...” and then he hesitates for a moment “...about Dream.”

“Why?” is all Tommy says, but his stomach twists. Wilbur and Phil’s expressions fall.

“Uhh, well, you see, he *kinda* used to go to the same school as me.”

“What?!—” Wilbur yells at the same time as Phil states:

“—You were in *high school* together.” Tommy is less surprised than he thought he’d be. He remembers what Techno said. *The only reason I’m not killin’ you is for everything we used to have before.* It’s this. This is what they had before.

“Yeah,” Techno agrees awkwardly, “we were all kinda in the same grade, but it’s not— you guys gotta understand that things were different back then. The Last Men that you know now didn’t exist. We were just a bunch of kids.”

“That’s— that’s only fair,” Phil deliberates. “Before, Kristen was a farmer, and I was a retail salesman manager. Wil,” and then he cackles again, “he was barely even *ten* when he wanted to be a musician.” Tommy reels for a second. He wasn’t even *born* back then.

“It’s a little hard to find a guitar now,” Wilbur states, “but I’ve managed.” Tommy remembers that word. It’s something Pre-crumble — an instrument that made music.

Techno lets out a huff of laughter, and then he stares up at the ceiling. “We all used to be someone else. The one who liked pullin’ pranks was Skeppy. Bad always got the worst of it.” Skeppy. Bad’s friend who has the Sick. Did they all go to the same high school? Did they *all* know each other before the Great Crumble?

“...What about everyone else?” *What about Dream?*

“Are you sure you wanna know?”

Tommy does, and he doesn’t. “Tell me,” he says instead.

“Alright. There was Sapnap, George, and Dream. I only really talked to Dream, but the three of them were inseparable. Sapnap was captain of the football team. He had kind of a short

fuse, but he always did the right thing. George played percussion in the pep band. He loved sleepin', and payin' Dream to do his homework for him. Dream — well, he was elected class president two years in a row. He was kind, and outgoin', and pretty much everyone loved him." Tommy squeezes his eyes shut. He doesn't really get most of what Techno is saying — it's from a different time, a different life — but *that's* not true. It's just like what Purpled said. Tommy didn't believe it then and he still can't believe it now. He can't bring himself to believe that Dream was *ever* like that, and yet — and yet he remembers the fear and humanity left over in his eyes.

"...The world has a way of changin' even the kindest men, though," Techno continues, and his voice turns flat. "The Great Crumble hit, and everyone started panickin'. We watched some of our classmates die and some move away. We watched our families burn, because when one person got the virus, that meant everyone could get it. We lost everythin', and I think that's when somethin' changed. Dream changed. He was a leader made the old fashioned way: born out of the flames and sickness of death, and everyone followed him. I followed him. He became the General, and I became the Blood God."

Tommy lets out a shaky breath as the story finishes. This is what makes a Man. This is what made Technoblade do all the things he did before they met. "You changed though," Wilbur concludes, "and *he* didn't." Techno turns his gaze away from the ceiling. His eyes are warm. It's there. It's still there. Tommy's breaths are shaky, but he isn't afraid. He's never going to be afraid of Techno. "I did," Techno admits. It's muted, but Tommy can see his smile. "I became somethin' better."

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Ranboo remembers, and then he doesn't.

He wakes up. He stares at the wall, and — and strains for *something*, but he doesn't know what. That's the problem. That's *his* problem. It's been like this ever since he can remember, which unfortunately, he often can't. It's like there's a chunk of his head missing. Wait, that was kind of a gross way to describe it. Anyway, he can't remember, but even so his heart stays calm. Contrary to what one *might* think in this situation, he doesn't panic. It's probably because, as he said, not remembering is a normal thing for him.

Ranboo is lying in bed one moment and the next he isn't, stumbling over to his desk like it's his first time learning how to walk. He starts pulling the drawers open, searching for — for — *there it is*, cover blank and binding made out of old leather. It's his memory book — the one he never ever shows anybody. In fact, the only one who knows it exists is Phil, and that's because he literally found him with it. Ranboo hasn't told anyone else — not even Tubbo. It would be so easy for someone to use his memory against him. *Has someone used it against him?*

He starts turning page after page, eyes scanning through his messy handwriting. There's a certain few things he never forgets, thankfully. The big things. It's still comforting to read

them and to remember that he is *someone*, even if he doesn't always know exactly who.

Your name is Ranboo.

You think you are seventeen years old.

You were born right before the Great Crumble (pg. 7).

You were rescued by Phil a few years ago (pg. 10 for your relationships).

You are a member of the Animal Army.

Tubbo is your best friend.

Tommy is your best friend.

Ranboo tries to write down the smaller things too — like what he's done each day or who he's last talked to. He looks through every single page and still can't remember. *What can't he remember? What is he forgetting?* It starts getting harder to breathe, so Ranboo clutches his memory book against his chest and leaves.

He steps outside and quietly closes the door behind him. It's a cold morning. The wind bites at his skin, and the sun is barely peeking above the horizon. Ranboo shoves his coat on, pulls the hood up over his head, and then he starts walking. A layer of frost has set on the ground, and he's careful not to slip and fall. He thinks he might have done that before.

It's not like the memory is just going to randomly come back to him. That's not how it works. Ranboo can't help but hope anyway — that he'll just be walking one cold morning and it will come back, that at least *something* will come back. He closes his eyes, and thinks as hard as he can.

He opens them, and he's sat, back pressed against one of the neon pink amusement park signs that reads DELIGHTING FANS SINCE 1999 with a smiling family pointing at something in the distance. Ranboo doesn't remember how he got here. He doesn't remember sitting down. It's actually a little hard to focus for some reason, but he looks up at the bright, startlingly noon sky. When did that happen? “—boo, are you here? Ranboo?”

He thinks he might hear his name again. As much as it drifts through him, the voice doesn't go away. His name gets louder and louder until he forces himself to look over. Tubbo and Tommy are standing a few feet away. “Ranboo? Are you okay?” Tubbo's eyes are wide, cheeks flushed like he's been running for a while now. Tommy's too. The stark white of the bandage under his eye sticks out. Ranboo meets their eyes on accident and jerks away.

“Ranboo?” Tommy calls out this time.

“It's okay,” Tubbo answers, and he slowly starts to walk closer. *Is it?* Ranboo clutches his memory book tighter against his chest and tries to think.

“Tubbo? What— what's going on?” Tommy whispers, and he sounds really close to panicking this time.

"It's okay," Tubbo repeats again. "This is just something that happens sometimes. Ranboo, can you hear me?"

"I— yeah," Ranboo says.

"Do you know where you are?" He nods. "Do you remember walking?"

"I thought it would help," Ranboo admits. He waits for a moment, and then he finally realizes, "I was sleepwalking, wasn't I?" This always happens: confusion and then realization.

Tubbo sits down on the ground next to him, but he doesn't try to meet his eyes this time. "Yeah," he confirms. "Did you remember anything?"

Tommy shuffles over and sinks down to the ground too. His tail curls around him.

Ranboo looks up at the sky again. "I don't think so. What— what time is it?"

"After breakfast," Tubbo tells him. "It took a while to find you, but by then I figured out what was going on."

Ranboo sighs. "It's been so long since last time. Sorry— sorry I scared you guys." This used to happen all the time when he first got here. Now, it's only like once or twice a month. Ranboo doesn't know when he first started "sleepwalking," but he knows it's because something bad happened to him, something *really* bad, so bad he lost his memories. At least, that's what everyone has told him, and it's not like he has a better theory. It's just— the fact that Tommy has never even seen it happen before makes it worse. It makes him feel worse.

"Don't apologize. It's not your fault," Tubbo states, and there's no room in his voice for arguing. He's right. Ranboo still feels bad, but he stops clutching his memory book as tightly — *his memory book*. He glances down at it, and then nervously back up at Tubbo and Tommy. Neither of them look scared now. Ranboo doesn't know what to say, since they clearly see the book in his arms. Why did he even bring it? How is he supposed to hide it now? *Does he need to hide it?* "I won't ask if you don't want me to," Tubbo suddenly reassures.

Tommy nods. "Yeah, Ranboob, there's plenty of things I don't talk about."

Ranboo's head starts screaming. *Don't tell him, don't tell them or they will use it against you.* He argues back. *How could either of them possibly do that, though?* He trusts them more than anybody else in this entire world. "It's—" Ranboo sputters, "It's Ranboo, and it's my memory book."

Tommy bursts into his wonderful, familiar laugh, and he's smiling. Tubbo is too when he asks, "Where you write down your memories?"

Ranboo nods, and then he realizes he's able to look them in the eyes now.

"Cool," Tommy comments.

Tubbo brushes dirt off his overalls and stands. His tail flutters. "Wanna go eat, Boo?" Tommy pulls himself up too. That's it. That's really it. Neither of them are asking. Neither of them are even looking at it, because—because they're looking at *him* instead. They care about *him*.

Ranboo lets out a shaky breath he didn't even realize he was holding, and he smiles. "I'm actually kind of starving."

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"Almost done, kid. In fact, you're healin' up quicker than expected." Tommy still flinches as Techno brushes the bruise on his face — the really bad one that he hates thinking about, and then he flinches *because* he even flinched at all. He doesn't *want* to. He knows it's okay. He's okay. Techno's hands are gentle. His fingers press soft cotton dabbed with soap and water. His hands wrap clean bandages and remove old ones.

"Course I am, bitch," Tommy says. He doesn't think about the nickname. He doesn't think about the familiar way the insult feels on his tongue. Techno huffs, but he continues. It makes Tommy grin.

Dab. Dap. Speaking of dapping something, the sound of arcade noises rings from the other room. Tommy can hear the little zip-zaps that come from the *Space Invaders* one. He fucking sucks at it. "Woah, a new high score! Dap me up!" Charlie obviously doesn't. Tommy's ears twitch towards the yelling.

"Nice going, Slime!" What the fuck — *slime*? says Fundy.

He can barely hear what Eret says, just the last half of his sentence. "—is gonna get here soon!" It's nearly time for dinner so most of the day-shifters are finishing up now. That must be what Eret meant. Tommy can't wait to see Tubbo and Ranboo and tell them—

He flinches again. His brain goes all soft at Techno's touch, but his body doesn't care. It just goes *mememe I'm a bitch* and makes him think he's gonna be hurt anyway. Wil always has some name for it that he can never remember. Tommy waits for a moment, but there's no anger in the silence that Techno leaves behind. It's nice.

"Hey, Techno?" Tommy asks as a bandaid is gently pressed against his arm and smoothed over. There's this feeling that surges in his chest, but it's new. He kind of—he kind of wants

—

"Yeah?"

"Can I tell you something?" It doesn't make sense. He's always shied away. He's always shut down at the thought. Techno isn't even *asking*. Nobody is asking him to, but sitting a room over from the arcade, Tommy suddenly wants to *talk*. It's not some big moment. It's not in

front of all of the Animal Army members like he thought it'd be. It's here with Techno nearly four weeks after they first met.

"Sure," Techno replies easily.

"Y'know how I was, uhh, running away?"

Techno's face is blank. "Yeah," he agrees, but he doesn't stop. He tears off the wrapping of another bandaid, and Tommy relaxes.

"It wasn't always like that. I used to—" it's difficult, it's still so difficult to say, "—I wasn't always *there*."

Techno does pause at that, and there's another bandaid held awkwardly in his hand. "I know, kid."

It's the last thing Tommy expected to hear. "You do?"

"I figured. There's no way you were raised at the Preserve your whole life. I would've known." The Preserve. *The Preserve*. Tommy has never heard the name before, but he knows what it means. "Is that what you wanted to tell me?" Techno continues with, but there's no accusation, or pressure, or boredom in it. It's just a question.

Tommy bites his lip and shakes his head. There's so much more than that. He doesn't think he can say everything, but he doesn't want to stop. Not now. "Do you know what Yellowstone is?"

Techno takes only a moment to respond. "It was a Pre-crumble park. In Wyomin'."

Tommy remembers the sign, and the confusion he felt. Back then, he barely understood anything. It feels like he's learned so much and yet so little in that time. "Yeah. It was where I grew up. With—" *say it*, "—with Sam."

Techno's expression shifts, before it settles on acceptance. Tommy sucks in a breath. "He found me crying in the woods one night. I was barely even a year old, but he took me in and raised me. He taught me everything I know."

The man places another bandaid on his arm, smooths it over, and Tommy continues. "Sam was fucking amazing. The—the absolute *best*. He let me do stupid shit all the time, but he always made sure I was safe." Tommy swallows. "I don't know why he lived out there, but he knew about the Great Crumble, and the Sick, and the Last Men. In case I ever had to run, he taught me how to survive."

"Is that how you knew how to build a fire?"

"Yeah. Learned when I was four."

Techno looks surprised. "When I was four, I was pretendin' to be a potato farmer."

Tommy sputters, and then it turns into a laugh. He slaps a hand against the table and doubles over. "A potato farmer?!"

Techno looks a bit uncomfortable now, and he shuffles in his seat. "Hey, I like potatoes. They're a good vegetable to grow. Hardy too," he defends.

"What kinda kid wants to be a *farmer* though? I wanted to be an astronaut!"

"Why an *astronaut*?"

"Because space is poggers!"

Techno huffs. "I've always wanted to ask what that means."

Tommy stops laughing at that. "What, poggers? It's like... when something is pog, innit?" Techno stares blankly. "It—" and then Tommy realizes he doesn't actually *know*. Pog means pog and poggers means poggers. It's just like any other word. "—it just means what it means. Sam used to say it."

"Makes sense."

Tommy sighs. Sam. "I think about him every day. I never stop thinking about him, Techno."

Techno shrugs. "Some people are worth rememberin'."

"You're right. It's just—he was more than that. He was my—my *dad*, and then he was fucking gone and I had to run. It always hurts to remember him." Tears build just behind Tommy's eyes, and a whine crawls out of his throat. "Sorry," he says even though he knows Techno doesn't care.

Techno doesn't ask for the rest of the story. He doesn't ask Tommy to talk about it. He doesn't tell Tommy it's okay or treat him any differently. He just asks, "How does it feel tellin' me now?"

Thinking about Sam hurts. It hurts worse than anything in this world, but it also feels good to finally say it. It feels *better* than good. Tommy wipes a sleeve across his eyes and smiles. "It hurts," he admits, "but it might hurt just a little less now."

It takes some time after that, and although Tommy still doesn't tell anyone the entire story, he tells them enough.

"Remember the first time we met... when I said the name Sam?" Tommy whispers to Tubbo and Ranboo one night — the three of them sitting at Ranboo's favorite spot as they stare at the sunset.

"His name was Sam," Tommy tells Wilbur and Phil after they pile in his room. He's a bit nervous, shifting into Techno's side the entire time, but he's also ready.

"I wanna tell you guys," Tommy begins while surrounded by the rest of his family, "about my dad." It still hurts even after all this time, but he remembers what he told Techno: every

time it hurts just a little less.

=====

Tubbo's boots crunch loudly against the ground. His ears twitch and his tail flutters as the snow melts against his skin. He glances back, and Ranboo is trailing a few feet away. His cat hood is folded over his head, and the little ears on it stick up into the air. On top of his regular hoodie, he's wearing a winter jacket to protect against the wind.

It's been nearly a month since Dream fell, and a little more since he first met Tommy. Tubbo couldn't be happier. He has a family. Tommy is safe and recovering from everything he's been through. Ranboo still sleepwalks, but it's getting better. He seems to really like Technoblade too. Tubbo isn't scared of him either, err—at least not nearly as much as he used to. He isn't going to tell him that though.

The only thing he has to complain about is the reason Ranboo and he are even out here to begin with. He woke up this morning to Wil ordering him to supply hunt a few miles out. Last week it was Niki and Jack, and the week before it was Foolish and Eret. That's why he's currently walking through some forest in the middle of nowhere with Ranboo. Wil kinda sucks sometimes. It's not like this isn't usual or anything, but Tubbo knows there's more to it than just the fact that they're always running out of stuff. It hasn't been that long since Tommy disappeared. Dream may have been defeated, but he's still only a state away. The last thing the Last Men ever do is give up.

Tubbo shifts his crossbow into his arms and waits for Ranboo to catch up. "How long did Wil say we needed to be out here?"

"A few hours, I think," Ranboo answers as he pulls his hoodie further over his face.

Tubbo groans, but he picks his boots up and keeps trudging through the snow. "Hey, it's not that bad," Ranboo tries to reason like the *reasoner* he is. "I mean, we get to see stuff like this, after all." He gestures everywhere, and despite how much more Tubbo also wants be spending time with Tommy, Ranboo is right. Tubbo doesn't know what the trees are called, but they extend for miles and miles out here without losing their leaves. The first time he ever smelled them, he knew he would never forget their smoky scent.

Tubbo looks back again. Ranboo is shivering slightly now, but his eyes are clear. He looks relaxed. "...And you're with me," Tubbo remarks.

Ranboo's eyes widen. He clears his throat and looks away for a moment, but there's a small smile on his face when he finally answers. "...Yeah, I am."

An hour passes. At least, Tubbo *thinks* it's been an hour. The sun has moved a little higher in the sky. He comes across a small creek that's frozen over, and tests the ice with his boot. It starts to break, and Tubbo kneels down to take a closer look at the water underneath.

“Tubbo?” Ranboo calls out all of a sudden, and he sounds concerned. Tubbo’s ears twitch. He looks over. Ranboo is staring at the ground.

“Yeah, Boo?”

“Don’t come over here.” It finally clicks. Whatever Ranboo is staring at is *bad*.

“Why?”

“There’s a, uhh, rope trap on the ground. I only saw it because it wasn’t covered in snow.”

Tubbo tenses. Is it Last Men, or is it hunters? “Shit. Can you step back from it?”

Ranboo nods a few times. He raises his foot up and takes an exaggerated step backwards, and then another, and another. Tubbo breathes a little easier once he’s out of there. He scans the ground, but there’s too much snow to see anything. “Should we see if there’s more?”

Ranboo shuffles nervously. “I don’t know. It might be better to just leave.”

Wilbur’s voice rings through Tubbo’s head: *The last thing I need is for either of you to get hurt*. Too bad Tubbo was never any good at listening to orders.

“We at least need to figure out if they’re old or not,” he argues.

“If you’re sure about this...” Ranboo frowns, but slowly starts to sweep snow away. Tubbo brushes layer after layer to reveal hard-packed dirt and finds nothing. Just when he starts to think that there must only be one, his eyes catch something.

“There’s another one.” It’s tied in a knot, but there’s a space left big enough for a foot to land in. A human foot. Tubbo contemplates setting it off to see if it even works, but then he hears something... something weird. His ears swivel towards it, but the noise disappears in the wind before he can figure out what it is.

“Oh, then—”

“—Shut up!” Tubbo doesn’t take the time to see Ranboo’s reaction. He’ll probably feel guilty later, but right now he focuses through the trees. He waits until he can hear the noise again, all high-pitched and— and wobbly. It’s been so long since he’s heard it before, but he has. *He’s made it before. Tubbo listen to me. I need you to run far, far away and hide for as long as you can, but I’ll find you. I promise—*

Tubbo runs towards the cries.

“W-wait! Tubbo, what’s going on? What’s wrong?” Ranboo yells as he runs after him. He can’t hear the cries. His ears are too weak.

“There’s — ” Tubbo pants out, “ — there’s a — ” and then he’s barrelling down a hill right into the gaze of a child. A *hybrid* child. There’s a snout where a human’s nose would have been, and two floppy pink ears on his head. His small form is braced against the side of a tree, one hand pressed against its bark, the other on the rope caught around his leg. Tubbo can

tell the second the child sees them, because he starts to panic. His eyes widen, and his hand begins to frantically pull on the rope like his life depends on it.

“Hey, hey,” Ranboo says softly, “it’s okay. We’re not going to hurt you.” Tubbo expects the child to at least hesitate, but he doesn’t. His eyes are blank. There’s nothing in them that indicates he even *heard* Ranboo. He’s shivering weakly, clothes too thin for the winter, and his hands are raw from the cold. No cries escape him now. How long has he even been out here? Is he too afraid to understand? Is he—

Tubbo swallows.

Is he normal?

Ranboo takes a hesitant step forward and the child tenses up. He lets out a noise that shoots straight into Tubbo’s stomach — the sound of a cornered animal. It’s high and drawn-out, and one Tubbo has never heard before. He doesn’t even know what kind of hybrid the child is.

Ranboo flinches back, and he looks over at Tubbo worriedly. This isn’t working. This isn’t *going* to work because the child is normal. He’s not like Tommy or him. He was never taught how to be a person. A cold rush of reality falls over Tubbo. Wilbur told him — he said — but Tubbo didn’t know it was like *this*. How are they ever going to get him out of the cold without using force? — the thought of even trying makes him sick. The child is scared, and hurt, and he’s *never* going to feel safe enough to come with them when he thinks they’re no different than—

Hold on a minute. Tubbo has an idea. He tries to slow the beating of his heart, and he takes a deep breath. “Let me try something,” he whispers over to Ranboo, who nods and hugs himself tighter.

Tubbo turns back to the child. He drops his crossbow and lowers himself to the ground. The child’s eyes are still so wide, and the fear in them is a deep, dark chasm as he watches. Tubbo does his best not to panic as he starts shuffling forward. Snow soaks into his clothes. His teeth chatter. He doesn’t care. The child lets out the beginnings of another noise, and Tubbo bleats.

Confusion flashes over the child’s face, and he slows his tugging on the rope. Tubbo bleats again, but more lowly this time. He’s almost an arms reach away when the child lets out a few warning noises and lowers his head. Tubbo doesn’t know how he knows what they mean, but he does. Hybrid stuff is just like that.

Hesitantly, Tubbo continues to approach until he’s within the same space as the child. He lowers himself even further, and looks at the ground. The child makes the same noise again, but it sounds more curious this time. Either Tubbo will be seen as threatening or safe. Either he’ll be able to help, or the child will run away and die. It’s an awful amount of pressure, but he’s been through so much worse in the past. He can do this.

Tubbo tenses up when he feels the child’s head shove against his arm, but he doesn’t react. Another few shoves and then something grabs at Tubbo’s coat. He finally looks down to see two hands curling around the soft fabric. The child is quiet again, but his eyes are focused as

he stares up at Tubbo. God, he can't be older than three or four. "Hey," Tubbo whispers, but the child freezes and he quickly replaces it with another goat noise. Okay *shit*, so he doesn't like human words. That kind of makes sense.

Tubbo places a hand against the child's leg, the one that has the rope caught around it, but then the child is letting go of Tubbo's coat, and—and tries to run. He gets only a few steps away before the rope pulls tight. It makes him crash against the snow, but he doesn't get back up. He starts to cry even harder than before.

Tubbo shakily stands back up. It isn't fair. None of this is *fair*. What did this child ever do to *anyone*? He was hated since the moment he was born for—for something he had no control over. Is this... is this what Tubbo would have been like if his mom and dad didn't love him?

Ranboo is still standing in the same spot as before, but he's shivering harder now. He looks heartbroken. He looks like he doesn't think there's anything more they can do, and maybe he's right—

No.

No.

The both of them are going to *save* this child, and he's going to have the best damn life, better than any of them have ever had. He's not just going to survive anymore. He's going to *live*.

Tubbo walks over to the child and picks him up. His cries immediately turn to screeching no human could ever make, and he starts struggling to get away. His legs kick and his hands scratch hard enough to draw blood. It's—it's *horrible*. "Tubbo, don't!" Ranboo yells, voice breaking. Tubbo doesn't listen. He places a hand against the child's back and does the one thing that always calmed him down. His dad's voice is clear and comforting in his head, something he's never going to forget.

Tubbo pats the child's back, and his screeching goes on and on what feels like forever until it finally, *finally* starts to lessen. Tubbo looks down, and he realizes that the child has stopped crying. He still whines here and there, but he presses his head harder against Tubbo's chest.

Tubbo doesn't know when he started crying too, but his bleat comes out shaky. He pats the child's back more. He's quiet now. His eyes slip shut, and then he's out like a rock. Tubbo makes sure the child really *is* asleep, before he turns to Ranboo and lets out a sob he can't hold back any longer.

"Ranboo—*fuck, Ranboo...*"

Ranboo's crying too, but there's hope in his eyes. "I know, I *know...* but—but it's okay now. He's—he's going to be okay."

"We—" he tries to say but another sob comes out, "—we need to get the rope off."

“Y-yeah. Should I help?”

Tubbo nods, and the other boy shuffles over. When Ranboo gets close enough, he hesitantly holds the child’s leg up and waits. Tubbo slips his knife out and hands it over, and then Ranboo starts to carefully cut the rope. Soon enough, it falls away and lands in the snow where it will stay forever. Tubbo would burn it if he could. “I think this is the *last* thing Wilbur expected us to find, honestly,” Ranboo comments nervously.

Tubbo shifts the child so he sits more comfortably against him. His eyes hurt. He’s freezing. His arms are bleeding. He couldn’t be more relieved or happy. “Serves him right for making us come all the way out here... I say we give the little guy a name.”

Halfway back, Ranboo pulls out his memory book and starts to scribble something down in it.

Tubbo asks him what it says.

So today I went patrolling with Tubbo. We found a hybrid boy.

I think we might have just adopted him???

We adopted him. We literally just adopted a child, what is my life.

His name is Michael.

When they return, Wilbur takes one look at the bundle in Tubbo’s arms and screams, “Is that a fucking *child* ??”

=====

Tommy is still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes when he walks into the breakfast hall. At one side of the table, he catches sight of Techno, Wilbur, Jack, and Puffy. Then there’s Tubbo, Ranboo, and Michael sat on the other side—

Tommy freezes.

Phil is dressed in an old, ratty looking apron, and he has a *spatula* in his hands. He’s cooking eggs (where did they get those from?!?) on some— some *mini oven on top of the table*. “What the *fu*—!”

“GOOD!” Michael screams, and there’s some grunty pig noise that comes from him after. It barely even sounds like a word. He’s wearing an oversized, black sweatshirt with choppily cut shorts and socks. At the sound of Tommy’s voice, he looks up and grunts. “ME ME!”

“Good morning, Tommy,” Tubbo says sheepishly. Ranboo smiles. The two of them are sat on either side of Michael. Tommy still doesn’t know how *that* happened. He’s hanging out at the

hideout with Wil one second and the next Tubbo and Ranboo are *married*, which yes, someone had to explain to him.

Tommy clears his throat. "Morning," he replies. No matter how hard he tries, he can't hide a smile as he walks over. Michael still can't pronounce his name so it's just been "Me Me" ever since he first started learning how to talk. "Hey, Michael," Tommy greets, and he adds a chitter at the end. The kid practically vibrates in his seat, and he grunts in approval. "You like eggs?"

"He—"

"GOOD!" Michael screams again, and he shoves more in his mouth.

"—He does," Ranboo finishes. Tommy bursts into laughter, and then he slides down into the chair next to Tubbo and looks at everyone else.

"Hey guys."

"Hey," Wilbur says, voice still groggy from sleep. He isn't wearing a cloak, but his usual mocha sweatshirt and black pants. His hair doesn't even look like he even brushed it this morning, but Tommy isn't surprised. It's Wil.

"How are you, Tommy?" Puffy asks. Her black hair is curly but organized as it falls across her shoulders, and she flashes him an attentive smile.

"I'm good," Tommy replies, and he is, over two months later and he really is, "but can I just ask what the *hell* Phil is wearing?"

"Aww, c'mon mate," Phil argues, and he cracks another egg into the little pan. He isn't wearing his green dress shirt or cloak this morning, but that makes sense. It would be kind of dumb to cook in those; instead, his apron falls over a shirt with a heart and the letters NY on it.

"He's makin' eggs for the kid," Techno shrugs. Tommy looks over at the man and sees the way he glances at Michael and then back like nothing happened. He acts all unbothered, but Tommy knows him better than that. It's only been like a month since they first found Michael. Tommy remembers the screaming and crying. The desperate scratching. The hiding. It sucked. It reminded Tommy of himself, and he thought it was going to be like that forever, but it wasn't. Michael learned to trust them slowly, and then all at once. Phil said he picked up on language quicker than any non-hybrid child ever would. Michael still panics. He still bites. He still hides under things when he gets scared, but he's stubborn and relentless, and he fit right into their lives like he was always meant to be there. This is the best mood Tommy has ever seen him in.

"Yeah, you missed the first half of the, uhh, 'Egg Party,' as we've taken to calling it," Jack explains exasperatedly. He's wearing his black hoodie, and he's still just as bald as when Tommy saw him last night.

"Bo!" Michael shouts as he looks at Tubbo and lets out a short grunt.

"Yeah, Michael?" Michael doesn't say anything. He just makes a grabby motion towards a glass of water, and Tubbo gently hands it to him. Michael spills it all over his face, but he looks happy the entire time. After he finally throws the cup down, Ranboo takes out a napkin and starts trying to wipe his mouth down.

Tommy sputters into another laugh, but it fades off when he suddenly thinks of himself again. He used to be like this. Sam would chase him around as he got into all sorts of trouble. He would tell him stories late into the night until Tommy finally closed his eyes. *Sam, Sam, Sam* — Tommy stops the thoughts, but they don't go away, not really. It's been like this ever since he first told Techno, and even worse since he told everyone else. It's like no matter what he does, he can't stop thinking about his home and the day he left it behind.

"How—" Jack manages to gasp out through his laughter, "—*how* does he have this much energy?"

"To be fair, he is like four years old. I bet you were a menace when you were four," Puffy says, and she points a finger right in Jack's face.

Jack swats the finger away and scowls. "Oi! I was not! I was well-behaved, and— and *nice*."

"Liar, liar, pants on fire!" Puffy sings.

"What the— what are you, *twelve*!?"

"No four year old is ever nice," Techno flatly comments, and he doesn't mention the singing.

"Exactly," Phil agrees before he scoops up some eggs out of the pan and onto a plate. Tommy expects him to set it down in front of Michael. He still looks like he could eat more. Phil starts walking around the table. He stops in front of Tommy and sets the plate down in front of him instead. Tommy stares down at the eggs for a moment, and then turns his head back up. Phil doesn't comment or make a big deal out of it, but he does look at Tommy warmly for a moment.

"I haven't had eggs since I was a kid," Tommy comments without thinking. He takes a bite and then it's *chasing chickens in and out of their coop, some innate part of him pleased by the way they clucked and bawked*.

"You're still a kid, Tommy," Wilbur says. Tommy narrows his eyes and swallows. Is he being serious, or—

"—Don't have to remind me," Techno adds on. Oh, it's going to be like that, huh?

"Who're you calling a kid?! I'm a Big Man — literally *the Biggest Man* ever!"

"BIG!"

Well, that's one way to get Michael to start talking more.



Tommy wants to tell them.

Everyone is done eating.

Wilbur is talking to Phil and Quackity to Foolish. Eret, Purpled, Jack, and Niki are playing some game with a bunch of cards. Puffy and Fundy are on guard duty tonight. Charlie is over at the arcades silently absorbed in trying to beat his high score again. Tubbo and Ranboo left early, because Michael isn't quite up for being in a room with every single Animal Army member yet. All that leaves is Techno, who is sitting next to him at one end of the table. Tommy glances up, and there's a curious look on the man's face — like he doesn't quite know what Tommy is thinking about, but he has a good guess.

Tommy waits.

He wants to say it.

He—

“—I wanna go visit my old home,” he forces out through a shaky breath. It's probably not the best time, but he doesn't think there will ever *really* be one.

There's a stutter of silence, and Tommy stops breathing for a second. It's been a long time since he's felt this way, and he doesn't miss it. He doesn't miss the fear that shoots through him. His heartbeat starts to rise, and his hands shake by his side. He can't quite look at anyone. Are they mad? Are they gonna say no? “Your old home?” Wilbur repeats, but he just sounds confused.

Tommy nods. “Yeah. In— in Wyoming.” He picks at the edge of his shirt and waits.

“Tommy, can you look at me?” Tommy does, and he sees worry and concern and panic and *love*. There's so much love in Wil's eyes, and it's for him. “Of course you can. You—you *never* have to ask for that.” Tommy's chest burns. He glances around the room. There's confusion, and happiness, and anger, but mostly everyone is— they look *relieved*. Why would they be relieved?

“Are you sure you wanna to do this, Tommy?”

Tommy meets Techno's eyes. He's thought about this every day for the past month. His bruises have healed, but there's something inside of him that he doesn't think ever will unless he does this.

He's sure.

CW: implied child abuse/dehumanization/starvation, disassociation

Next chapter Tommy will visit his home. I wonder what he will find :)

Tubbo & Ranboo: I've only had Michael for a day and a half, but if anything happened to him, I would kill everyone in this room and then myself.

Some extra things:

- Hybrids learn faster than non-hybrids, which is how Michael is able to speak after just a month
- I love Chaotic Kristen. She taught Wilbur everything he knows.
- Phil keeps giving Tommy gifts. His shoes were just the first. It's his love language.
- SBI is finally here. After the battle, they started Bonding. Their relationship isn't the typical father-son one though.

If I think of more, I will add.

Feel free to leave a comment (even just a POG)! I really appreciate them. See y'all next week!!

an extra second, an extra minute, an extra moment with the ones we love

Chapter Notes

It may be a little later than usual because I'm not home, but it's still on time!!

If there's formatting issues you didn't see anything.

Here's the last chapter :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The rest of the Animal Army's voices drift in from the other room.

“Are you sure?” Tommy asks again, adjusting his backpack against his shoulders. It’s full of everything he could think to bring: food, water, his favorite blanket, a sleeping bag, and a change of clothes. Tubbo slowly shakes his head, and he places a hand on top of Michael’s head. The kid is clinging to his leg, peering out from behind it with wide eyes. He doesn’t scream “Me Me” this morning or smile, but he lets out a few soft grunts as he stares up at Tommy.

“I’m sure,” Tubbo affirms, and his ears droop a bit.

Ranboo shuffles awkwardly on his feet, but he still smiles. “Me too. We—we want to be here to take care of Michael.” Michael lets out a nervous grunt at the sound of his name, and he buries his head further into Tubbo’s leg.

Phil, Techno, and Wil decided to come with him. The rest of the Animal Army are staying behind. Tommy wishes they could all come with him, but they need to stay behind and protect the hideout in case anyone attacks. Even so, Tommy still wants his best friends. He wants them to see the cabin where he grew up and tell them stories about Sam until they fall asleep together under the stars.

It’s not as if they can’t leave, it’s that they don’t *want* to. Tommy can see it in their eyes, in their every gentle movement. He won’t lie to himself. At first, he was jealous of Michael. He was jealous of how much of their time he got. Now, he looks down at Tubbo’s hand placed so carefully on Michael’s head, and his eyes burn. It doesn’t make him jealous. It just reminds him of Sam.

Tommy needs his best friends, sure, but Michael needs them *more*. He’s been alone his entire life, but now he doesn’t have to be. “Okay,” Tommy replies and he holds back the sadness that wants to seep into it. “We’ll be back in like two weeks unless something comes up.” He doesn’t want to spend too long in Wyoming — just a few days, enough time to remember his

home. The thought of going makes him nervous at it is, let alone going to a place only a day or two away from Dream.

Tubbo's guilt fades. "Sweet. You gotta tell us *everything* when you get back." Ranboo nods a couple times.

Tommy slowly pulls them into a hug so he doesn't startle Michael. "Yeah," he whispers so they can both hear, "for sure."

He lets them go and backs a few feet away. Tommy looks down and waves at Michael. The little hybrid shrinks under the attention, but then he lets out a chuff and waves back. Tommy adjusts his backpack again, takes a deep breath, and then he goes to find everyone else.

He travels down the same hallway he saw when he first came here — the one that Wil showed him with all the Animal Army drawings. Tommy trails a hand against the concrete walls, and his fingers pass over the new ones, painted only about a week ago:

COW. Tommy didn't pick a raccoon, much to everyone's shock. He doesn't know why. It's not like just because he is one, he's going to pick it as his favorite. No, he chose a cow, for Henry. Tommy wonders whether the stuffed animal is still where he left it all those months ago. His outfit isn't compete yet. None of the new ones are, because finding the right materials is apparently a *lot* harder than he originally thought. Fundy helped him spraypaint a jacket with black and white spots a few days ago.

The next one is POLAR BEAR. After careful thought, Techno picked his animal. At the time, Tommy at least understood what a bear was, having actually seen a few when he was a kid. He just didn't know what "polar" meant. Techno carefully drew his brushstrokes as he explained that it just means they live in cold places. Tommy thinks it's a good choice. He never messed with a bear if he saw one, because they are territorial. Techno lined one of Phil's bucket hats with fur and sewed ears on the top. The two of them match now.

There's one more left. PIG. In all honestly, Tommy isn't entirely sure Michael didn't just pick a pig *because* he is one. He knows Michael is smart enough to know there are other animals. The problem is probably that he just doesn't know what the point of the drawings are yet. Nobody said no. Nobody complained. They just watched Michael dip his hands into the paint and giggle as he splatted them against the wall. He wears his little pink t-shirt everywhere.

Tommy's hand finally reaches the edge of the wall and falls. He keeps walking until he reaches the end of the hallway where the arcade door lies. The second he turns the knob and pushes it open, he hears Wilbur's voice. His tone is the same one he always has while in the middle of an argument.

"— *not* what I meant and you know it." Well, that explains it. Wilbur is staring down at Quackity, and the both of them are standing off to the side of the room. Charlie, Fundy, Eret, and Puffy are playing games. The rest of the members, Foolish, Niki, Jack, and Purpled, are listening to the argument. Phil is standing directly behind the two of them. He looks stressed. Tommy can't find Techno, so he assumes he must not be here yet.

"Yeah, yeah, I got it," Quackity replies as he raises his hands. "In case you fail to remember, you've left before."

"I know. It's just—"

Phil raises his head up, and his eyes brighten a little. "Tommy!" he yells, and everyone else begins to look over.

Tommy slides up next to them. "Hey, everyone," he says casually.

Wilbur cuts himself off, but he grins as if whatever he was going to say is no longer important. "Hey, we were just finalizing our plans. Did you say bye?"

Tommy nods, but he forces himself to move on. "Where's Techno?"

Phil pushes himself off the wall. "He should be here in like a minute."

Tommy listens to them go over some other things, a few of the members speaking up with their own opinions: The amount of supplies they have. Scheduling. Patrolling areas. Tommy wonders how someone would *ever* be able to do this alone. He's glad Wilbur doesn't have to.

"The keyboard at the very back left has started becoming unresponsive. I think it may just be wearing out," Eret is reporting when all of a sudden Tommy's ears twitch. It's the door. He swears it really is a minute later that Techno arrives. He's wearing his bucket hat, hoodie, and jeans. His boots thud against the concrete floor as he zones in on them, and there's a backpack slung over his shoulder.

"Are we ready to leave?" he calls out.

"Should be," Phil replies, and he slides one of the chairs out and lifts up a backpack. Tommy didn't even realize it was there.

"Yeah, my horse is packed already," Wilbur adds, and then he turns to the rest of the members and nods. They all begin to group up — even the ones who seemed distracted a few seconds ago, and as if on cue, one by one they begin to walk up. Tommy realizes that they had this planned. It's just like the first time he met them, back before he even knew any of their names, only this time he feels no fear. He's nervous, but it's not the sickening kind. It's not because he's waiting for someone to hurt him.

Charlie approaches first. "Hey, everyone. Hey, Tommy. I just wanna say good luck on your future adventure. Dap me up!" Tommy grins and does.

"I hope you can find whatever it is you're looking for." Purpled.

"See you guys in a bit." Jack.

"It'll be quiet, well, at least quieter without you guys here." Puffy.

"Be safe and all that. I doubt you have anything to worry about though." Fundy.

"Best of luck, Tommy." Eret.

"I'm so happy you can go back. Be safe." Niki.

Tommy looks around the room one last time, and he grins. "I don't really know what to say. Thank you, everyone. Thank you so fucking much." He's doing this. He's going to do this. He turns back around and meets Wilbur's eyes.

Wilbur nods at him. "Alright, let's go," he says, and they do.

Tommy has been to the stables only a few times before, and every time he was filled with a hesitant, wonderous joy. It hurt to see Carl alone. It hurt to be reminded of Techno back then, but a part of him kept wanting to come back. Now, he's here yet again, but for a completely different reason.

Techno is walking beside him, Phil and Wilbur a few feet ahead, until they come up to the old concrete building with designs on it, which are apparently called "graffiti." Tommy sees three saddled horses in the stalls, heads swiveling towards the sound of their footsteps. Carl is one of them, and he huffs as they get closer. Tommy doesn't recognize the other two. Why are there only three horses? He frowns. "Where's mine?"

Phil sends him a skeptical look. "Do you even know how to ride a horse?"

Tommy's tail fluffs up and he chitters. "'Course I fucking do!" He doesn't.

Wilbur snorts. "I thought you could share," he explains.

"Takin' one less horse *would* save on supplies too." Tommy kicks his tennis shoes against the ground and mumbles under his breath. He can't find a way to argue against them.

"Nice to see you again, Carl," Techno whisper as he packs his bags onto the horse's saddle. Tommy watches Phil and Wilbur do the same with their horses, and he waits for them to bring them out of the stables. Wilbur is the first. He walks up to Tommy and places a hand on his horse. "This is Ossium. He's Quackity's, but I don't give a fuck." The horse's coat is a pure white and his eyes are black. Tommy rolls his eyes, but he can't help but grin. He's starting to think Wil *likes* making Quackity mad.

Phil walks out of the stables next. He takes one look at Ossium and places a hand on his face. "Oh my god. When he finds out, I'm not helping you. Also, this is Spots," he beams. The horse is white with brown spots.

Tommy narrows his eyes. "...Spots because he has spots?"

Phil nods. "Tubbo named him."

Techno brings Carl out. He brushes a hand carefully through the horse's mane, before he finally looks up at them. "Who're you ridin' with Tommy?"

Tommy doesn't want to pick. "Can I take turns?"

“Fine by me,” Techno states. Phil and Wilbur nod easily. Tommy doesn’t respond, but he does walk up to Carl and pets his snout again, which is answer enough as to who he wants to ride with first. Wilbur places his foot in the holster and swings up onto the saddle. Phil follows. Techno is last again. Tommy thinks that, for whatever reason, he might be doing it on purpose now. The man looks down at Tommy and holds his hand out. Tommy takes it without a second thought. As he’s pulled up, he realizes there’s a space left in the front this time. He slots himself against Techno’s chest and feels—he feels *safe*. He wonders how many times he’s going to experience the same things and yet feel nothing like he did the first time.

There’s no gate to stop them from riding straight out of the hideout, but Purpled is guarding the top of the arcade. Tommy waves at him as they leave, and then he looks around. There’s fresh snow pressed against the ground and grass that still clings to some of its greenness. The trees, the ones that don’t have needles—

Tommy’s eyes snap shut. *Struggling against the ground, just out of reach*—Techno’s shifting grip pulls him back. Wrong thing to think of, wrong word, *stop thinking about it*. He lets out a shaky, gaspy breath and focuses on the forest that spans around them, at the leaves—*leaves* are falling off the trees more and more everyday, and he can see the occasional bird fly through them.

Tommy is staring at a distant group of clouds, wondering whether it’s going to rain, when he suddenly feels them slow down. He looks forward right as Phil pulls on his reigns, but he’s not looking back at him. His gaze is placed solely on the ground. Tommy follows it, and his eyes land on a sword. It’s halfway stabbed into the ground. Drapped over its hilt is a cloak, and at its base lies a golden crown coated in frost. *After tonight, I will no longer be the Blood God either.* Techno left them here just like he said he would.

Techno’s breaths are slow and deep. He isn’t the least bit nervous as they stare down at his past. Tommy waits for him to say something, but he doesn’t. Neither do Phil or Wilbur. The only sound that passes between them is their gentle breathing.

Tommy watches the cloak drift against the ground, so close but never actually touching it. He thinks: these are last remnants of the Blood God, and then they leave the past behind.



Tommy opens his eyes. His cheek is smooshed against the ground, and there’s something lying against him. Whatever it is, it isn’t uncomfortable. It doesn’t make him feel trapped. He can hear fire crackle and wind that chills against his skin. It takes probably a few seconds *too* long for him to realize. Even so, Tommy’s heart doesn’t start to race. His hands are steady. He feels a lazy warmth set into his bones.

It’s ridiculous, because halfway through their trip, Tommy doesn’t wake up against the ground. The ground doesn’t *breathe*. He wakes up against Techno’s chest. Wil’s arm is slung

over his side. Phil's head is resting against his other. Tommy starts to purr, and then he opens his eyes and sees the beginnings of dawn, an orange light hued into the sky. Tommy's purrs start to fade as he catches against the waves of sleep, and he's about to fall into them entirely when he hears a voice.

“I heard there was a special place,” it softly sings. Wil. Tommy opens his eyes again, and he looks over, *“Where men could go and emanipate.”* Wil is staring up at the sky, his voice gently spilling into the morning, *“The brutality and the tyranny of their rulers.”* It's unlike anything Tommy has ever heard, all sincere and a bit sad too. He keeps listening until, *“My L'manburg... my L'manburg...”* and then Wil's voice trails off. Tommy waits for more, holding his breath until the next word comes, but it never does.

Techno keeps breathing slow and deep.

Tommy thinks, for just a second, that he feels Phil shift against his side. “...Wil?”

Wil's arm presses a little tighter over him. “Yeah?”

“Wha' was tha'?”

Wil lets out a hum. “It was a song I wrote after the Great Crumble about a place I wish existed, but never would.”

“Why doesn't it exist?”

“Because,” Wil states, but his voice turns prideful, “I made the Animal Army instead.”

“Oh,” Tommy replies, and he's glad. He's glad that that place never existed, because Wilbur found a different one — one that he doesn't have to sing about in the early morning before anyone's ears can hear. Tommy remembers another voice too, deep and steady. He closes his eyes as the memory rises through him. “...Sam used to sing,” he confesses. There's a lot of things he's never told anyone, things about Sam he hasn't been able to say out loud for fear that they will break him.

Wil's arm shifts over him. “...What kinds of songs?”

Tommy keeps his eyes shut, but he tells Wilbur. He tells him about the weird Pre-crumble songs that Sam would sing, and if there's one in particular that his breath catches on, Wil doesn't mention it. That song — it was the last one he ever heard before Sam wiped the tears from his eyes and walked to his death.

Tommy whispers lyrics into the dawning sky. Before he falls back asleep, he feels closer than ever to telling them everything.

Tommy wakes again, and the smell of freshly cooking rabbit meat hits his nose a second later. Techno's breathing changes below him as he starts to wake up. He must smell it too. Tommy *really* doesn't want to get up. He doesn't want to be cold, but he also doesn't want to be hungry either, so eventually he gives up

Tommy rubs his eyes and forces himself to stand. He takes a few steps and plops down as close to the fire as he can. Wilbur is poking it with a stick and Phil is stirring a pot. He's wearing a winter coat *and* hat, but he's still shivering. "Good morning," Phil greets, and then he reaches down and picks up an empty can by the pot. Tommy watches as he pours the rabbit meat and—that earthy smell he remembers... potatoes, into the pot. Phil gives him a good portion, blows to cool it down, and then walks over. He reaches down to hand the can to him, and Tommy gently takes it.

"It's rabbit and potatoes," Wilbur explains. Tommy already knows, but he isn't picky.

Tommy nods anyway, and then he slowly tips the can back. It's funny. When he woke up, his stomach didn't ache at all. Yeah, he was hungry, he *is* hungry, but not to the point that it's all he can think about. It doesn't matter though, because the soup still tastes just as amazing as if he *were* still starving. Tommy doesn't know if it has something to do with why he's eating it or who made it — because Phil has always cooked for him, and his cooking is always good — or the way it seems to warm him up from the inside out. It's exactly what he needed to stop shivering so much.

Phil takes a can over to Wilbur next, who sets his stick down and holds it. "Thanks," he comments.

Tommy's ears twitch towards the sound of shuffling, and he slurps up another bite of meat before he looks over. Techno is finally up, and he lazily walks a few feet over. He looks down at Tommy, his hair messy and eyes still half shut from sleep, and sits down to his right. "What's for breakfast?"

"Rabbit and canned potatoes," Phil answers.

"Nice. I like potatoes."

Phil laughs. It's softer than his usual cackle as he pours another can and brings it over to Techno. Tommy eats up the last of his, but he's still hungry. He glances around at everyone, and pushes his can out towards Phil. He can't look at him— at any of them as he does it. "Of course, mate," Phil says so easily, and he refills the can and hands it back.

Tommy eats the rest of his soup.

Afterwards, they clean and pack everything up, and then Techno pulls out a map. He holds it in front of Tommy and points at a spot on it. "This is about where we are now, and we're travelin' up through here," he reminds Tommy as his finger trails next to a road labelled 191. They went over this a day or two ago, but in all honesty, Tommy forgot. "We're wantin' to get to Yellowstone, which is here," Techno says as he circles a huge corner of Wyoming. The park is way bigger than Tommy ever thought, but it makes sense. It's why he was able to survive for so long without being found. "Goin' through the area between these lakes leaves us with a two options. Either we keep followin' the road up into the heart of the park, or we take a left. It's gonna depend on where you think we should head."

Tommy stares down at the two options. The road is easy to keep track of. It's nearing winter, so traveling is only becoming harder. Also, the last thing they want to do is get lost. At the

same time, the lake is harder to keep track of, but probably a lot safer. That's the problem with this choice: Tommy has no idea where his home is. "I don't know," he admits, "but I will when we get closer."

Techno nods as if he already knew this. "Then for now we stick nearer to the road."

Wilbur's shoes slosh against the wet ground as he walks over. He stares down at the map for a moment. "Are you sure? Going around the lake is safer. I don't want to run into anyone out here."

Tommy looks over at Phil. He's staring at them with a contemplative look on his face, one hand placed supportively against Spot's side. "I'm okay with either. We packed more than enough supplies, and if we do see someone we can always run. Besides, Techno's face will just scare them off, right?"

Techno huffs out, "Not anymore. I doubt they'd want anythin' other than revenge."

"If it is Last Men, then they'd know we're here. Dream would know. You're well aware of how close we are to him right now," Wilbur points out.

Phil sighs. "That's true. Tommy?"

Tommy stares back down at the map for a moment while he thinks. Honestly, it's a risk going either way. This entire trip is dangerous, but they decided to do it anyway. Everyone decided to do it for him. He lets out a short sigh. Wilbur is right too. The closer they get to his home, the closer they get to Dream, and as much as he wishes it didn't, the thought still scares him more than anything. "I think we should— should go to the left and follow the lake."

The three of them nod. Tommy waits for them to argue, but they don't. Wil hops on to Ossium and offers him his hand a moment later. As he takes it, Tommy can't help but think how nice it is to be able to make a decision and know that the choice won't be taken from him.



Nearly a day later, they reach the lake. Techno reminds them of the name: Shoshone. It's a good ways into Yellowstone, and a little harder to traverse because of the denseness of the forest, but they manage. Tommy catches glimpses of the dark blue, shimmering water. Spot's hooves crunch against the gravelly shore as Phil weaves them in and out of the treeline.

Tommy breathes in, but this time he doesn't inhale the salty air. His gut sinks. "There's— there's a human close to us. Really close," he manages to get out. Tommy remembers how last time he couldn't tell the difference between Techno's scent and the other Last Men; from the Animal Army's and the Last Men. This time he can tell the difference. The human is close, and they're approaching.

“Where?” Techno asks.

“We need to—” *run*. Tommy tries to finish, but he can’t. He flinches back when the growl of a gun hits his ears. It reverberates through the trees and across the lake, and Spots lets out a panicked squeal. That’s not what scares Tommy. It’s the yell that comes after.

“What the hell are you doing, Connor!?” The voice is gruff, but not too old or young either. It sounds like a Man. It *has* to be a Man. Who else is going to be out here right now? Tommy’s breaths quicken, and he looks up as Phil’s grip tightens on the reigns to keep Spots from running. He was wrong, he was *wrong*, they never should have gone this way.

Wilbur pulls his crossbow out, and Techno his gun — the rifle he always used to carry with him. Both of their weapons are aimed towards the direction of the voice. Tommy feels a hand tug his hat down further over his head to hide his ears, and he presses his tail tighter against his back. That’s all the time they have, before a young man comes walking out of the forest. He’s wearing a dark blue baseball cap, a brown coat with a pair of jeans that end in scuffed tennis shoes. There’s a backpack over his shoulders, and a rifle in his hands.

Nobody breathes as he looks up, eyes widening as fear wraps across his face. “Shit,” he barks out as he drops his rifle onto the ground without a second thought. He holds his shaking hands towards the sky. “Please don’t shoot me. Is this your forest? I didn’t— didn’t know I was trespassing.” Trespassing?

“Who are you?” Wilbur asks, voice cold but expression still twisting in confusion. He lowers his crossbow just a bit. Techno doesn’t. His gun is now aimed at the young man’s chest. Tommy has no doubts. Techno would shoot this person without hesitation, if he thought there was even a chance he was going to hurt him.

“Connor, where the fuck did you go!?” It’s the Man with the gruff voice again, but this time he sounds closer. He sounds angrier.

Connor glances nervously across their faces. He doesn’t answer the Man. He keeps his shakings hands in the air. “Connor— my name’s Connor. I swear I wasn’t attacking you guys, just out trying to find some— some food.” The answer makes Tommy’s winding thoughts slow.

“Who else is with you?” Wilbur continues to question, but his crossbow lowers to his lap. Tommy realizes what that means — he doesn’t think Connor is a threat to them. He takes in the young man’s ragged appearance, and the way he’s sniffling his nose every few seconds despite being held at gunpoint.

“My—” Connor starts to answer, but he’s cut off as someone else comes stumbling through the trees. Immediately, Tommy knows this was the Man yelling. His hair is completely messed up and chin stubbly. He’s wearing similar clothes to Connor — bag slung over one shoulder that he lazily grips onto. There’s no weapon in his hands, but there is a bottle, which he swings up against his lips and takes a drink from.

When he sees them, his eyes widen just like Connor’s did. The amount of time it takes for the Man to realize would almost be funny if Tommy wasn’t so scared. He can’t stop shaking.

“Jesus—shit—We have nothin’, folks. Just a gun and a fuck ton of bad luck,” he laughs unhappily, but Tommy can see the way his eyes are slightly unfocused. Is it fear? No, that’s not it. “Seriously, you wanna take someone hostage, take me. Just let me finish my whiskey first,” he says as he raises his bottle and swings another sip into his mouth.

Oh. Whiskey. His unfocused eyes. It’s the same stuff that made Quackity yell and Wilbur talk weird. What did Phil tell him it was called? Drunk... drinking? Why is this Man drinking it right now? Do Last Men drink? Is that why he’s talking so slow? What the *hell* is going on?

“You’re not Last Men,” Phil states, and his grip loosens on the reigns. Techno lowers his rifle. Wilbur wipes the confusion off his face and replaces it with something more blank.

“Doubt it,” Techno agrees.

Connor visibly relaxes at the lack of weapons aimed at him. He doesn’t comment on their observations, but he does take a few steps back. The man with him slings an arm over his shoulder, and whispers way too loudly, “Think we should run for it?”

Connor glances up at them again, and this time he just looks tired. “Are you going to hurt us?”

“No,” Tommy answers firmly, “not unless you hurt us.”

Connor looks surprised for a moment, but then he nods and turns back to the man with him. Tommy’s ears twitch from under his hat as he listens to the low, fast tone of his voice. “Schlatt, listen to me. We just spooked these folks. They aren’t going to hurt us.”

Schlatt slowly nods, but he still looks confused. “Did you hit the deer?”

Connor looks down at the ground and he lets out a sigh. “I missed.”

“Dammit,” Schlatt grumbles, and he presses a hand against his face as he turns to them. “What’re you four doin’ out here anyway?”

“Travelin’ up through Wyomin’. To get somewhere safer,” Techno answers shortly. “What about you two?”

Schlatt brings his bottle up again. “Schlatt,” Connor says, but it’s more than just the man’s name. There’s too much emotion in it. Tommy is half convinced Schlatt is going to take another sip anyway, but then the bottle stops right before it tips against his lips, and he lets it fall back down against his leg. “What anyone is tryin’ to do out here. Survive,” he finally answers. “Did you know the nearest place is one of the Last Men’s, which is great and all, ‘til they wanted to make Connor one.”

“I’m guessin’ that didn’t work out,” Techno comments.

“No fuckin’ way. I might not be sober most of the time, but even *I’m* smart enough not to let my nephew do that shit. Doesn’t matter how many fuckin’ MRE tokens it gets us.” Connor’s eyes fall on the ground again, but he nods. Tommy’s head spins. Nephew? MRE tokens?

Wait, does this mean Schlatt likes hybrids, or is it something else? Would he attack Tommy if he knew? Would Connor?

Techno nods as if this all makes sense to him. It probably does. "'Sides," Schlatt continues without waiting for them to respond, "I don't know if you heard about what happened, but some Pro-hybrid group blew half the place to high hell. Glad we fuckin' left." Tommy tenses. That was them. How many people know? Did Dream tell everyone, or did word spread that quickly without him wanting it to?

"No, we've never been," Phil lies. "Is there another city around here?" Wait, what? Aren't the only cities still left the ones under the Last Men?

"No," Connor speaks up, shaking his head, "we're heading over to Idaho to try to find a place that'll take us in." Schlatt and Connor look fine, but underneath that, Tommy knows they're tired and hungry. He wonders how much more it would take for them to go back to the Last Men and beg for safety. Schlatt didn't necessarily sound *happy* about the 'Pro-hybrid group.' "So, do you guys have names, or...?"

"Of course," Phil says. "I'm Phil, and this is my son, Wilbur," he says as he gestures to Wilbur. Tommy is a bit surprised. For some reason, Phil doesn't talk about being Wilbur's dad, and Wilbur doesn't talk about being his son. The last time Tommy heard either say it was when he found out — when Wilbur got drunk. It's something he always wonders about but never asked, because there's clearly reason why they don't bring it up themselves.

"Technoblade," Techno says.

"Nice to meet—" Connor begins.

"—I could've fuckin' *sworn* you were all related. No offense, but you're kind've a weird group." Schlatt interrupts, gesturing to their outfits.

"Could say the same thing about you," Wilbur remarks.

Schlatt laughs at that. It's surprising but also not at all. He *is* drunk. His laughter is loud as it echoes through the trees, and he slaps a hand against his knee before he looks back up.

"You're a funny guy. I hope y'all make it out of the state alive."

"Yeah. Me too," Connor agrees, looking at the horses, saddle bags, and weapons.

"I hope you can find some food before night falls," Phil wishes them back.

"Appreciate that," Connor replies, and then he looks down at the ground. "Does that mean I can take my gun back?"

Techno nods. "Go ahead, but be careful who you aim it at." There's a warning in the statement.

"Of course," Connor says, and he shuffles over to his gun and picks it up carefully. He aims the barrel towards the ground and backs up until he's standing by Schlatt again.

Here the thing: Tommy feels *bad*. He used to think that the only humans who lived out here were evil, but he's met so many different kinds of people since then. He knows better now. The truth is that Schlatt and Connor are no different than him. Everyone living after the Great Crumble is a survivor.

Tommy thinks about them wandering out here in the snow waiting to find a stray deer. He thinks about them travelling into Idaho with nothing but their backpacks. Suddenly, he thinks of the Animal Army. Is that even a possibility? If either Schlatt or Connor were going to hurt them, they would have by now. Tommy still doesn't trust them. Definitely not enough to camp with them for the night. He knows how quickly things could change if they were to discover he's a hybrid. That part doesn't matter right now though. He still looks up at Phil, hoping that whatever is in his eyes right now will be enough for him to understand.

Phil looks down at him and nods. "Actually," he speaks up, "it's kind of far, but there's a place in Colorado. It's near Arapaho & Roosevelt National Forest. Tell them Phil sent you." There's no guarantee Schlatt and Connor will ever go. There's no guarantee that they will want *anything* to do with a 'Pro-hybrid group.' It's suspicious that Phil would even bring this up now, but it's not as if the information is going to put them in any more danger. The Last Men know where they are anyway.

"Near Arapaho? Never been there, but thanks for tellin' us," Schlatt drawls. Something flashes across Connor's face, but it's gone as quick as it came. Tommy knows what it was: relief.

"No problem, mate," Phil replies, and he looks towards the others. Techno flicks Carl's reigns, and the horse begins to slowly walk away. Wilbur does the same. Phil too. Tommy looks back one last time at Schlatt and Connor with their ripped clothes and serious expressions, and he does one last thing. He reaches into a pouch on the side of Spot's saddle and pulls out the first two cans he can feel. He throws them at Schlatt and Connor. Connor catches his. Schlatt doesn't, and it knocks him over.

Tommy hopes this isn't the last time he ever sees them.



Tommy's legs are shaky. His arms twitch as he moves tree branches out of the way for the horses. He's waited so long for this moment, and yet a part of him wants to run as far away as he can. He can't stop moving. There's too many thoughts in his head. He's happy and sad; fearless and fearful all at the same time. He knows the cabin is close. It's difficult to explain how he knows, but there's something about the snow-capped mountain he can see in the distance. The pine trees. The ice-covered crooks.

His eyes catch on—

The fence.

It's there in front of him, with its rusted iron, square-shaped spaces, and cable that lines the top. Tommy looks closer. There's something orange fluttering in the wind, and it makes him freeze. Distantly, he can still hear Phil, Techno, and Wilbur shuffle off of the horses, but he doesn't focus on them. He can't. His eyes won't leave the ribbon, torn and damp from the weather, but still clinging to the fence.

Techno's boots approach behind him. Carl snorts out a breath. "Are those—?"

"—Here. We're here," Tommy somehow manages to gasp out, stopping Techno from finishing his sentence. He doesn't want to hear anything else, so he stumbles forward and starts to walk towards the fence.

"Tommy, wait a second," Wilbur calls out, but he doesn't listen. Tommy keeps going until he reaches the fence line, and his fingers slot into its grooves. He can feel the rough metal. It seeps into his skin ice-cold. The fence looks the same as it always used to except it also doesn't. Tommy remembers thinking it was a giant, impenetrable thing. He remembers never, *ever* wanting to leave for fear of meeting what lies outside. Now, it looks old, and dilapidated. It looks like anyone could climb it. In the end, the fence wasn't what protected him.

Tommy forces himself to look back. Phil, Techno, and Wilbur are stood still. They're staring at him, waiting for him to say something. "The ribbons are old," Tommy explains. He still hasn't told them how Sam died, hasn't told them that he ran, and *definitely* hasn't told them how he met Dream.

He needs to.

Phil nods. "Is there a way for the horses to get in?"

"Only one way to find out," Tommy says, and he begins to follow the fence, brushing a hand against it as he walks. His ears twitch as the horses' hooves follow behind him. Every fifteen steps or so, another orange ribbon is tied to the fence. Tommy tries to ignore them. Eventually, he finds part of the fence fallen over. It looks like it was knocked down. Was it a storm, or a Last Man, or was it—was it Dream?

Phil, Techno, and Wilbur catch up. "This is it," Tommy states. "The cabin is a short walk from here."

"Okay, whenever you're ready," Wilbur says with a soft, understanding smile. Phil nods. His eyes are attentive. Techno's expression doesn't change, but his posture is relaxed. He's ready to stand there all day if that's what Tommy wants.

Tommy takes a moment to look at them and remind himself he's not alone. He breathes, and nods, and then lifts his foot through the space. It lands on the other side. His shoe sinks into the snow. He lifts his other foot over, and then he's standing on the inside of the fence. He's here. He's really here. It takes a moment for Carl, Ossium, and Spots to gain the courage to step over the fence too, but once they do, they come out on the other side unbothered.

Tommy gestures for them to follow him again, and he starts to walk towards the cabin. He doesn't even have to think about where he's going. He knows this place. Every patch of dirt, every tree, and every rock was his to explore. He thought he would feel... either really happy or really sad once he finally saw it all again. Right now, Tommy doesn't feel either. It's all muted and left somewhere in the back of his head. It's like he's staring at someone else's life and not his own, not the one he was living three months ago.

Phil, Techno, and Wilbur are taking it all in, eyes scanning through the random junk they walk by. Things that used to be useful. Things that kept Sam and him alive. Tommy knows they have questions, but they don't want to hurt him. He didn't want it to be like *this* though. He has to break the silence. "...These were the chicken and duck houses." He gestures at a dozen or so old, wooden boxes with holes cut into them. "We used to have some when I was like eight. I named all mine H names: Harold, Harvey, Henrietta. Henrietta was a bitch though. She always bit me if I didn't give her my sandwiches."

"*Henrietta?*"

"Yes, *Wilbur*, Henrietta."

Phil cackles. "What about all this other stuff?" Tommy looks around, and he starts to explain.

"Okay, so that's the wheelbarrow we used to move soil." The wheel broke on it one day, and Tommy couldn't figure out how to fix it. Same with the door hinge. He never was good at that stuff.

They keep walking, and Tommy spots a wheel made out of tire parts, metal ends, and bottles. It's big. The water that would normally flow through it is completely frozen over. "That's the water wheel. Sam made a pipe system to move water through it. He was always good at building things."

"Yeah, no kiddin'," Techno remarks. "Was he an engineer?"

Tommy pauses. "What's that?"

Techno takes a moment to respond, probably trying to think of a way to explain something to someone who has never heard of it before. "Pre-crumble job where a person would draw things and build what they drew."

"Oh, sounds cool," Tommy replies. He bet Sam would have liked to be one of those. He wonders if he was.

"Did he talk much about his life before the Great Crumble?" Wilbur asks curiously.

Tommy shakes his head. "No. I didn't really ask, but it was the one thing he always avoided talking about... Oh, that's the water boiler we used one winter," he continues, changing the subject off of Sam's old life. Tommy points towards a giant, metal barrel with a tap at the end. "That was the first time I ever heard a plane. My ears hurt. I hated it, but Sam tried to convince me it was just a giant bird."

Phil looks up at the sky for a moment. “Did you believe him?”

Tommy smiles. “Yup, ‘til I saw another one when I was older.” He leans down, picks up a stick from off the ground, and starts dragging it through the snow. His shoes are almost entirely soaked now, but he doesn’t care.

Tommy looks through the trees.

He was too distracted to even realize, but it’s there.

The cabin is there. Tommy can see the makeshift wooden roof and blankets covering the windows. He has no idea if Sam built it or not, but he wouldn’t be surprised at all if he had. At this time of night, there would normally have been a light shining from the house, but it’s completely dark now. Nobody has lived here in a long time.

Tommy’s steps pick up as he walks towards it. His ears twitch, and his tail curls around his leg. The closer he gets, the more the memories rush through him, both good and bad:

Bedtime stories.

Henry.

Snow angels.

The growl of a gun.

Animal noises.

Stairs.

Bubbly soap.

Sam’s fingers.

Songs.

Songs.

That final song.

Tommy’s shoe lands on the porch, and the tempest of roaring thoughts dies. He takes a moment to breathe. The wood creaks as he walks on it, but that’s not new. He pulls one of the blankets used to insulate the cabin back. The inside is quiet and dark, and the door—the hinge is still damaged, but the door itself is shut. Why is it shut? Tommy hadn’t left it shut when he ran. He smells the air, but there’s nothing on it. Nobody else is here. Why is the door shut?

He slowly pulls the door open and steps inside. His eyes flit around. He’s tense and ready to run the second he sees movement, but the rooms look the same. There’s shoes and coats

placed by the entrance. He passes by tools, and food wrappers, and empty plates that he was too lazy to ever pick up — evidence that this was once his life.

Tommy walks through the hall and into the living room. He remembers what this room looked like the last time he saw it, and it didn't look like this. It's a mess, but it's not *his* mess. There's something wrong about it.

Henry is still on the couch, but he's on the wrong cushion. His button eyes stare up at Tommy. He looks like he was thrown there.

What's going on?

Tommy takes a step towards Henry, but his shoe lands next to something. It's a piece of paper on the floor. He picks it up, and stares down at the lines of crayon. It's a drawing of him and Sam, and his name is scribbled at the bottom in bright yellow: *Tomy*.

“Tommy?”

What the fuck.

What the fuck?

“*Wil*,” he whines, and it all comes crashing down. Tommy sinks to the floor. His eyes won't leave his own name.

Wilbur shoots into the room with Phil and Techno following close behind him. Tommy's eyes burn, and choked, painful sobs begin to tear out of him. He manages to look up. Wilbur's face turns from violence, to anger, to confusion. He runs over and collapses down next to him. His arms wrap around Tommy and pull him close.

Tommy buries his head into Wilbur's chest. His fingers tighten around the paper in his hand, but he lets it go before he can ruin it even more. He hates him, he hates him, *he hates him*.
“—*I hate him, I hate him.*”

“I know,” Wilbur whispers.

“He— he fucking did this. He se— searched every—*everything*. Just when I th— thought I finally fucking got away from him for good. I thought he wouldn't be able to hu— *hurt* me.” Tommy shudders through another sob, and he can't keep talking. He feels Phil's arms circle around him. Techno's come next. He knows it was Dream. It had to be. How long was he here? How long did he and Punz look through every precious thing he ever had so they could use it to break him?

Tommy doesn't know how long he stays on the floor. Eventually, he runs out of tears, and pushes back against the arms around him when they start to feel uncomfortable. “I'm— I'm okay. I should've known,” Tommy says as he wipes an arm over his eyes. He feels better and so, *so* much worse at the same time. He looks up. Phil looks like he would kill Dream right now if he could. Wil is crying, but he's trying his best to hide it. Techno— he's glancing around the room with an expression Tommy has never seen before.

“We’re goin’ to make this right, kid,” he reassures.

Tommy shakily smiles. “Not a kid. Bitch,” he bites back and pulls himself up off the floor. He looks around the room again. It makes him feel like shit, but it’s nothing compared to what came after.

Tommy reaches down and picks the drawing back up again. Henry is still staring up at him from the couch, so he walks over and picks the little cow up, the soft, but matted material used to make him familiar. Tommy slowly sits down on the couch and hugs Henry close to his chest. It both comforts him and makes him feel small.

“Sam died,” he starts with. Tommy can fix a room, but he can’t fix his own head. He’s going to try anyway.

The rest of the day is spent cleaning up the cabin. Tommy helps Phil find a better spot for the horses, and picks up trash with Techno, and giggles with Wil at the children’s books Sam drew from memory. He pins drawings to the wall of astronauts and dinosaurs and adventures he always wanted to go on with Sam. He goes through his room and sorts through his collection of shiny objects that make him happy for no reason other than them being shiny.

Tommy gives them his life, and they take it, and his heart mends just a little bit more.

When he’s finally done as much as he can, Tommy collapses onto the couch and looks up at the ceiling. His eyes hurt, and his arms ache from moving things all day. He should feel like even worse shit than before, but he doesn’t. He feels better than he has in a long, *long* time. “Hey, Tommy,” Techno calls from the other room, and his boots move towards him. Tommy’s ear twitches, and he opens his mouth to reply. “You two should probably come in here too,” he hears Techno whisper. His tone is serious.

Tommy sits up. Techno walks into the room, and there’s something in his arms — it’s a cardboard box with no lid. Tommy’s heart starts to speed up. Phil and Wilbur follow behind, but they pause by at door. “I think it’s Sam’s. Found it underneath his bed,” Techno explains before Tommy can really start to freak out.

Techno sits down on the couch, but he leaves enough space to put the box between them. Phil and Wilbur finally come inside. Phil pulls up a kitchen chair and sets it close to them. Wilbur sits on the other side of the couch. His arm wraps around Tommy’s shoulders.

Tommy leans into the touch, takes a deep breath, and then he looks down into the box. The first thing he sees is a photograph. He’s seen a few in his life so he knows what they are. Sam never showed him this one though — never showed him anything in this box. Tommy reaches down and carefully pulls it out. *Sam*. He looks at Sam’s face. He’s younger, and he’s wearing different clothes, but it’s his Sam Nook. There’s another person that Tommy has never seen before too. The man is smiling as he stands by Sam’s side — one of his arms wrapped over his shoulder and the other missing. Tommy didn’t know people could have only one arm.

“What is it?” Phil asks, waiting patiently in his kitchen chair.

Tommy looks up. "It's a photo of Sam, and— and someone else I don't know," Tommy explains. He holds the photograph out towards Phil, and that's when he sees it. There's writing on the back. It's scribbly and barely legible, but Tommy knows whose it is. It's Sam's. He reads it.

I regret letting you leave that day more than anything. I know you didn't mean what you said, but I just wish I knew why. If I never see you again, the one thing I would say is that I never blamed you. I hope you're alive. I hope you're still in GoGro.

-Sammy

What? Tommy doesn't *understand*. He looks back down into the box. There's a card with Sam's face printed in the corner, an old key with the word "Ponk" on one side and an address on the other, and a bunch of other things that couldn't have come from anywhere but the Pre-crumble. He has so many questions: Is Ponk the human standing next to Sam? Who is he? Is he still alive? How did Sam know him? Why would he blame him? *Where* is GoGro?

Tommy has none of the answers, but he wants to find them.

=====

It takes them a little over a week to get to GoGro, or Goss Grove, CO, but it's less than *twenty-four* hours from the Animal Army hideout. The journey to find the address written on Sam's key wasn't easy. It was cold, and long, and they almost ran into the Last Men like five times. Also, apparently there's people who still live in this city too. At least, he thinks they live here. They aren't like the Last Men, but they aren't like the Animal Army either. They're just survivors, which is still something Tommy is trying to wrap his head around. None of them look particularly friendly though. They stand on their porches and stare.

Let's just say, coming here has been a bit of a detour.

Tommy thought Ponk's house would be bigger. It doesn't look special. In fact, it looks no different than any other house on the street. It's a pale white, and most of the walls are torn into, wood underneath them exposed by years of wind, rain, and nature. The roof is overgrown; tree branches and vines travel down the walls and up through the floorboards.

"This is it," Tommy says. He's a little breathless and a lot disbelieving right now.

"This is it," Wilbur echoes back, and he adjusts his crossbow tighter in his arms.

"Should we just knock?" Techno suggests. Tommy nods, and the three of them slide off their horses. He takes Wilbur's hand as he lowers himself off of Ossium. They have no idea if

Ponk is alive, but they're about to find out.

Tommy slowly walks up the door, and he can feel the way his heart starts to beat faster with every step. He listens for movement inside but hears none, and then lifts his hand up and knocks twice on the wooden, paint-chipped door. The echo makes his ears twitch under his hat.

He waits.

Nothing.

Tommy looks back. Phil, Techno, and Wilbur are clearly wary, hands within reach of their weapons, but they are also curious. He can see it in their eyes. "Should I knock again?" he whispers, because he's honestly not sure what to do now.

Phil shakes his head. "Nah. Either they don't want to be seen, or there's no one inside." Some part of Tommy still hopes someone will answer, and he wonders when he started doing *that* again.

Techno shifts past him a moment later and tries the door knob. It's locked. He stands there for a moment, and then he looks down at Tommy's pocket. "What about the key?"

Tommy pulls it out right as Wilbur steps over a flowerbed that probably had flowers in it once. It probably had purple flowers. He tries to pull up the latch of the window, and it doesn't move. "Yeah, let's try the key," he admits.

"Yeah, let's try the key," he admits.

Tommy nods again and pushes the key into the lock. It goes. He twists it, and then tries to push the door. It opens with a slight creak. Sam's key works. Why? Why did he have a key to Ponk's house?

"Nice job, mate," Phil says.

Tommy grins and gives them a thumbs up. "What can I say? I'm a master of stealth."

Wilbur laughs, but he tries to keep himself quiet so that the neighbors won't hear. Phil snorts. Techno lets out a puff of air and says, "I'll go tie the horses up."

"I'll help," Wilbur offers. "We'll meet you inside." Techno shrugs and doesn't argue.

"Alright," Phil nods.

Tommy watches them circle around and into the backyard before he turns to Phil, and they step through the doorway together.

The inside looks like a normal house, and Tommy still doesn't hear any movement or voices. It doesn't look like anyone has lived here in a while. Ponk hasn't lived here. Anything of value has been long since been taken from the rooms, and now all that's left are remnants of a Pre-crumble life.

It doesn't take much longer for Tommy to hear footsteps and the familiar sound of Techno and Wilbur's voices. "No, they were clearly staring at *you*,"

"I'm just sayin', you look kind of suspicious."

"What does that mean?! I'm not the one with the name Techno *blade*," Wilbur argues, but there's no anger in it. At least, no *real* anger. Tommy can practically see the eye roll.

"Okay, whatever you say Will-i-am."

"It's *William*, and that's not even my name."

"Wil-i-am."

"I refuse to continue this conversation. Tommy? Phil?" Wilbur calls out a second later, probably at the front door now. "You guys okay?"

"Yeah, we're in here!" Tommy yells back, and he can hear the two of them stride through the door. Just a few seconds later, they walk into the room.

"Can you believe this guy?" Wilbur gestures.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," Techno defends.

"Oh my god, you two are ridiculous," Phil says, but there's amusement in his voice.

Tommy can't help but laugh, and then their search begins.

They check every room, but there's no memories or letters or secrets. There's no box under Ponk's bed — his bedroom is empty. Tommy paces the living room and dread falls over him. Is this it? Did they come here for nothing? *Why* wouldn't there be anything? Was it already stolen?

"Wait," Wilbur says right as they are about to give up, "there's something up there." Tommy looks up at the ceiling. At first, he doesn't see anything different about the panel, but then he looks at one of its edges. There's no way he would have *ever* spotted it on his own. Wilbur pushes the couch over. He stands on top of it and locks his fingers underneath the edge of the panel. It swings down to reveal a space inside, and Tommy's heart starts beating faster. Wilbur carefully reaches a hand up through the space and pulls on something. A rope. It's a rope. Tommy's ear twitches back when something creaks in the ceiling and a set of stairs fold down.

"What the hell," Tommy manages to say.

Wilbur grabs onto the railing. "I think we may have found something," he remarks as he places a foot on the first step and starts to ascend. Tommy takes a deep breath before he follows. He doesn't have to look back to hear Phil and Techno's footsteps following. It feels like forever before Tommy is standing in the attic. The room is completely cluttered, and soft light bathes it in a warm glow. There's boxes everywhere, and a little desk pressed at the back

with papers on it. Tommy spots an old blanket and picks it up. The material is coarse under his fingers, but there's something comforting about it.

There's lots of things piled away in the attic, more things than Tommy has ever seen in his life: old bedding, pillows, blankets, "Chris"mas decorations, board games, children's toys, books, and CD's. There's an old guitar shoved in one corner of the room that Wilbur takes and begins to strum. Ponk stored all these things away. Was it because he didn't need them after Great Crumble happened? Did he not want to look at them anymore?

Tommy finds a photograph lying on the desk. He wipes away the thin film of dust off it to uncover Ponk's face. He's the same age as he was in the last one, and he's doing the same thing: smiling with one arm wrapped around someone. The only difference is that it's a brown-haired lady, and the two of them are surrounded by a group of people. All of them are wearing the same long, white clothes and dark pants. Tommy knows what the clothes mean. He doesn't like them. They remind him of Bad.

"Looks like a group of scientists," Wilbur states.

Tommy nods. Why would Ponk be with a group of scientists? Was he one? He turns the photo around and on the back there's a note with only two words: *Love, Hannah*. Tommy flips the picture back around again and stares at the lady again. Is her name Hannah? He hands the photo over to Wilbur and opens the desk drawers. The first one has a box in it full of papers. Tommy pulls it out and sets it on the desk, picking up and inspecting the front of the stack. "Fort Smith," he reads out loud.

"That sounds familiar," Wilbur says as he looks up from the photo in his hand, and he sounds suspicious.

Phil makes a noise in agreement. "You probably remember it from the news. They closed that place when the virus began to spread."

"Rumor was it was where the virus first started," Techno adds.

What? Tommy's eyes widen and he keeps reading the paper. "What's a gen-o-logy report?"

"Genealogy. It means they were studying genetics — what the body is made of," Phil explains.

"What else does it say?" Wilbur urges.

Tommy reads the papers, and he finds his answers:

Fort Smith Labs was a military funded project located in Colorado.

Ponk was the head-geneticist.

His team was working on a way to extend human life.

One day, they found something, a sample, found deep in the Alaskan ice.

The very last report is the day the Great Crumble began — the day the virus was unleashed and hybrids were born.

It's pretty easy to put the pieces together after that.

Tommy throws the box across the room, and its contents crash against the floor. His breaths are short, but this time it's not from fear — it's from anger. "He — he lied to me about everything!" he screams, and the words burn out of his throat. *I never blamed you.* Sam knew. He *knew* Ponk. He knew this entire time that hybrids weren't born because of Nature. They were born because of *Men*. He made up some story about it instead of telling Tommy the truth. Tommy thought Sam *always* told him the truth.

"Tommy, we still don't know the whole story yet," Phil says calmly, but even he sounds a little shaken.

"Ponk was the head fucking geno-whatever! You're telling me he didn't know about *any* of this shit?!"

"We don't know!" Wilbur yells back, and his tone makes Tommy flinch. He watches as guilt flashes across Wilbur's face, and then he inhales sharply. He runs a hand over his face. "Sorry... just — *fuck*, this is crazy. Sam's letter said he — he "let him leave," right? It could be that the last time they saw each other was before the Great Crumble."

"Does it really change anythin'? Sam still raised you. Protected you. There's not a lot of people who would've done that," Techno states. Tommy *knows* Sam loved him. That's not what this is about. It's about the fact that Sam knew Ponk — the man responsible for causing the end of the world.

"Of course it does! I spent my entire life thinking hybrids were a miracle of nature." Wilbur scoffs. "I formed an army who believed it too."

Techno stares at him for a moment. "At least you believed in somethin'."

Wilbur stares back, and then his face twists. "I have to tell them. What if — what if they don't want to be a part of the Animal Army anymore?" he asks, word quick and breathless.

Phil shakes his head, and he walks over and kneels down next to the box. He begins to put things back in it as he says, "Wil, you *know* they love you. None of them are ever going to leave. No matter what."

"I've heard that before," Wilbur says, and there's no anger in his voice. It's nothing more than a statement — a spoken fact, as his eyes settle on Phil. Tommy tenses. It's the same look as when Wilbur told him about the Last Men. It's the same as when Wilbur told him about his mom. Tommy is more sure now than ever that it has something to do with Phil and his relationship. It's the reason why Wilbur never really calls Phil his dad, and Phil never really calls Wilbur his son. He realizes something else too: it might have to do with that place Wilbur made.

Phil doesn't respond. He's staring down into the box. His eyes are wide. "Wil, I know, but we need to talk about this later. I found something." Wilbur's eyes move from Phil's face to his hands.

Phil stands up. Tommy can barely process what just happened between the two of them, but he sees what Wilbur was looking at. Phil is holding a book. He walks over and holds it out to Tommy, and his expression is uncomfortable but still kind. "It was at the bottom of the box."

Tommy gently takes the book into his hand without saying anything. He shakily opens the cover and sees a crumpled piece of paper taped to the inside.

I hope it's you reading this. If you are, don't feel too bad. I couldn't let you help me so I said all those things to hurt you. I knew something bad was going to happen after they shut down the project.

I've written everything I can remember about my research in this journal. There's a list of Fort Smith Lab's reports I could find and the current news on the incurable virus, and the flowers, and the animal children being born.

If this is still you Sam, know that I did everything I could. The only thing I regret is that I couldn't bring myself to abandon humanity's future. If I did, maybe I could have told you about what I did, and I could have seen you one last time before I died.

"Ponky," Tommy says, but his voice breaks. It's the last thing written on the letter in a messy, desperate signature. Ponk and Sam never saw each other again. They never knew if the other was alive. Ponk's journal has been here — sitting in this attic for the past sixteen years gathering dust. He never told Sam about the research. At least, not all of it, not that it even mattered. Sam figured it out anyway. In the letter, he knew what Ponk had done. Why? Why didn't Sam try to find Ponk? Why did he go to Yellowstone? He had time. He wasn't sick. He

Tommy finally understands. He understands everything.

"Oh my god," Wilbur gasps, and he must have come to the same conclusion.

"Tommy," Phil whispers, and he places his hands on his head.

Techno looks at him and for a split second his expression flashes honest and vulnerable before it turns calculating. "Ponk spent his last remainin' breath keepin' this stuff safe. Is it there, kid?"

Tommy wipes an arm across his face and silently flips through the journal. Its pages are filled with hurried lines of notes, and drawings, and scientific looking things. Tommy looks up at him, and his expression gives away the answer better than any word ever could — it's something full of grief and hope.

The reason Sam fled to Yellowstone and never came back was because of *him*. It was because he found a raccoon hybrid abandoned and left for dead. Sam found Tommy, and raised him, and kept him safe until he no longer could. Sam loved him more than he loved the *entire world*.

Tommy doesn't know if this means Ponk and Sam were good or evil, selfish or selfless, responsible for the end of the world or the beginning of it. He doesn't think it really matters — all that matters is that Ponk loved Sam, and Sam loved Ponk.

Tommy isn't going to let either of them die for nothing.

He knows what he needs to do with this journal, and it doesn't matter how mad everyone is going to be. He's going to do it.

They spend the night at the house.

Tommy can hear Wilbur and Phil talking in the bathroom, but not even his ears can pick up on what is being said — only the fight between soft and stressed tones. He tries to distract himself by eating the soup Techno made. It doesn't taste very good. Tommy smacks his lips a few times. "Is this spoiled?"

"Yup," Techno drawls.

Tommy makes a face at him. There was a time he would've desperately thanked him for even a little bit of soup. Not anymore. "Bitch, giving me spoiled food," he mumbles, and then it falls silent again and he can hear Phil and Wilbur's voices again. "What do you think they're talking about?"

Techno takes another bite of his soup. He doesn't answer right away, and that only makes Tommy more nervous. "Don't ask questions you don't want the answers to."

Tommy doesn't know what to say to that. He wants to be angry, but he can't bring himself to feel anything other than relief. Anyone else and it might sound like a warning, but it's from Techno. Tommy knows the only reason he said it is because it's true. "Fair 'nuff," he mumbles again as he falls back further against the couch. "...But what can I do to get some soup that isn't *spoiled*?" he asks a second later just because he wants to be annoying.

Techno huffs. "Come over here and get seconds."

Tommy grins and gets up.

It takes maybe a few minutes more until Tommy's ears perk up at the sound of a door opening. Wilbur and Phil's steps are soft. When they finally walk through the doorway, Tommy can see the dried tears and tiredness on their faces, but there's relief too.

Wilbur wipes his eyes and walks over. He falls down next to Tommy on the couch, and although he doesn't grin, he says, "So, what'd Techno make this time?"

Tommy lets out a breath he didn't even know he was holding. Whatever it is that was said, it helped.

=====

Wilbur gets back to the Animal Army hideout at dusk.

He stares up at the roof of the arcade room and blows out a breath of air.

Quackity is staring down at them. Wilbur can tell it's him by the black and green feathers of his cloak. He can't see Quackity's expression, but he *can* see the moment he finally realizes. This is the worst possible time for them to have gotten back, because nobody else is on guard-duty. It's also *perfect*.

Wilbur grins. He wonders how mad Quackity looks right now.

"What the *fuck*!?" echoes across the hideout. Well, guess that answers that.

"That doesn't sound good," Phil comments, but his tone is light and on the teasing-side. Wilbur appreciates it. He can look Phil in the eyes.

"You're definitely gettin' punched in the face," Techno adds. Very helpful.

Tommy's ears fold back and he slides off of Ossium. He doesn't look too scared, but he also doesn't look particularly interested in getting caught in whatever is about to happen. Wilbur doesn't blame him.

Wilbur steers Ossium towards the hideout's entrance. He's not sure if the members heard Quackity's scream, but if they did, they should be out soon to greet them and ask about their trip — the usual stuff that happens when Wilbur has been gone this long. This time coming back feels a little different though.

Wilbur tries not to think about what he has to tell everyone or what they might say. The moment the realization hit him that everything he thought was true wasn't, it was too familiar. It was an old memory drawn up through the graveyard in his mind. He knows what it's like to feel alone, but more than that he hates that he's scared he'll end up like that again. Phil —

"—What the *hell* is wrong with you, Wilbur? When did I *ever* give you permission to take Ossium?" Wilbur is torn out of his thoughts by that sharp voice, and he does his best to focus back on the present. Quackity's expression is twisted up in rage, and his steps are obnoxiously loud. Ossium winnies.

Quackity is suddenly a few feet away.

Wilbur tightens his grip on Ossium's reins. He knows how much the horse means to Quackity. That was the entire fucking point in taking him. It's not that Wilbur is being petty,

though — the only one out of the two of them who acts like *that* is Quackity. If anything, he's simply spiteful.

"I think you'll forgive me, Big Q," he replies.

Quackity lets out a short, humorless laugh. "Oh, yeah?" He closes the few feet left between them and places a hand on Ossium. It's quite the contrast — his gentleness and his overwhelming hatred. Wilbur's grin returns. He opens his mouth, but suddenly there's an arm on him. He can barely think. He can barely raise his hands up before he's falling off the saddle, but the impact never hits. Wilbur feels himself pulled forward. His breaths are shallow as he comes face to face with Quackity. "And why exactly would I do that?"

Wilbur doesn't look away. He doesn't tense up. This was his plan after all. He just leans down further and whispers back, "Because we might have just found a Cure."

Quackity's eyes widen. Wilbur still expects a punch, but suddenly the hand in his shirt lets go and he's falling. Wilbur lands on his side, and he has to hold back a gasp at the pain. He doesn't dwell on it though, devoting all his attention on Quackity, watching as emotions flash across his face. His expression goes from shock to anger to shock to relief. Wilbur might even laugh at the reaction normally, but he feels a burning joy rise up in his chest instead. Quackity finally breaks into a smile. "You're serious. You're actually serious. Wilbur, this is — is *incredible!*"

"I know," Wilbur says breathily, "but shit, man. I really thought you were gonna punch me."

Quackity regards him with a different kind of expression now. His smile falls, and he curls his fists. Oh, *shit*. "You're goddamn *lucky* that was the reason," Quackity spits after a few tense seconds pass, and then he reaches a hand out. Wilbur stares at it for a moment. He takes it, pulls himself back up, and finally looks at everyone else. Phil's hand is on his face, but he pulls it down to reveal a smile. Tommy looks like he can't believe he got away with it. Honestly, Wilbur is surprised too. Techno is as blank as ever, but his posture gives away his amusement.

Wilbur turns back to Quackity. Quackity turns back to him. His expression is contemplative and a bit wary now. Wilbur straightens up at it. "It's been a long two weeks," Quackity states. Before Wilbur can respond, Quackity is already pulling on Ossium's reins and walking away.

Wilbur follows. His steps are fast and deliberate as he finally catches up to Quackity. It's silent for a moment, only the sound of their footsteps and the clop of horse hooves, before Wilbur can't hold back anymore and asks, "What happened?"

"An attack. By the Last Men."

"*Fuck.* When? How many? Is everyone — Are they okay?" This is exactly what he *didn't* want to happen.

Wilbur's panic dies down a bit. Quackity doesn't seem too concerned, but he is tense when he responds. "A few days ago at dusk. At least ten. Honestly, we would have been completely

“fucked if it weren’t for Tubbo’s hearing.” Wilbur lets out a breath. That means they won. That means the Last Men ran. Thank god.

“Was it Dream?”

Quackity shoots him a glare before he looks forward again. “Of course it fucking was. I knew this was going to happen,” he says, but the tone isn’t a burning, angry one. It’s cold this time.

“We had to go,” he counters. If Quackity is trying to say they shouldn’t have —

“— No, yeah,” Quackity quickly agrees. Wilbur relaxes. “And not just because you apparently found a fucking *Cure*. Where the hell did you even find something like that?”

Wilbur tells him.

He tells Quackity about the trip, about Schlatt and Connor, about Yellowstone — although he leaves most of those details out. Tommy can tell them in his own time — and most importantly, about Sam’s letter. Quackity is silent the entire time, attentive, only nodding to show he’s still listening. Wilbur stumbles over his words at the end. He tells Quackity about Ponk, the papers, and the journal. He tells him how everything they stood for was a lie and falls silent.

Quackity stares at him for half a second before he scoffs. Quackity doesn’t look mad. He doesn’t even look *upset*. There’s an edge in his eyes that gives away his shock, but that’s it. “What exactly are you expecting me to say, Wilbur? I could care less if the virus was man-made. I still believe in the Animal Army, and I always will. Do you, or should I finally take over?”

Quackity’s grin is all teeth. It’s a challenge.

Wilbur is taken aback. He’s completely and utterly *floored*. Quackity doesn’t even falter. He isn’t going to leave. He’s standing here waiting for him to answer.

Wilbur’s hands shake, but it’s not the same. He’s not ten years old anymore. He’s no longer a kid watching everything crumble around him. He’s no longer waiting for someone to come save him. “You’ve got a lot of nerve, Big Q,” Wilbur finally says, and he watches as Quackity hides a smirk behind his back.

He’s Wilbur Soot, leader of the Animal Army and protector of hybrids, and that’s something that’s *never* going to change.



Tommy stares down at the journal in his hands, and then back up at the Last Man — at Sapnap. His nose looks like shit. It looks like he got punched. He’s still wearing the same white headband, and the same torn clothes, and that’s probably the same gun in his hands too.

Tommy tenses, but the weapon isn't aimed at him. Sapnap doesn't call for anyone. He doesn't even *look* at the distant walls of the Preserve, but Tommy knows what's going on inside. He thinks of the flower Dream crushed in his hand and the third Wave. Dream was right for once: it's worse. The Sick is worse. Tommy saw the purple flowers sprouting through the dirt, and mud, and concrete on the way here — such a beautiful warning before an ugly death; one that will trail after the last humans left until they are all destroyed.

Sapnap doesn't even talk about that. He just stops a few feet away and plainly asks, "What are you doing here?" but there's an edge in his voice. He's worried.

Tommy is worried too. He looks behind him, but his eyes never completely leave Sapnap. He's not a total fucking idiot. He knew he wasn't going to be able to come here alone, so he told the only person he knew would let him do this. Tommy at least left a letter so that nobody thinks he got taken again.

Techno stands right behind him. His presence isn't loud, but it's still insanely comforting. He takes a moment to nod, but once he does Tommy turns his attention back on Sapnap. Before he can stop the thought, Tommy remembers Techno's story. He remembers what he said: *Sapnap was captain of the football team. He had kind of a short fuse, but he always did the right thing.*

Tommy slowly holds up the journal in his hand, and the Man's face twists in confusion. "Seriously, what *is* that? I thought you'd know better than to come back here, especially after — after everything."

Tommy doesn't need the reminder. He thinks he's doing a pretty good job hiding the way he really feels for once, because he's absolutely fucking *terrified* right now. His heart feels like it's about to explode, and his arms are shaking. Dream is still there. He's still *here*. Tommy knows from Sapnap's voice. It's angry, and guilty, but it's also defensive too. Tommy doesn't want to be here any longer than he has to. "It's a Cure," he states, and his voice doesn't even shake.

Sapnap almost drops his gun in shock. His eyes are wide, and he looks like he thinks this might be some sick joke. "What?" he manages to gasp.

"You heard him," Techno says gruffly.

Sapnap doesn't do anything for a couple seconds. Tommy watches, ears pressing back and a growl on the tip of his tongue, as the Man finally lowers his gun. His steps are careful as he walks over and holds a hand out. Tommy places the book into his palm, but doesn't let go yet. "It's research on the virus. Bad will know what to do with it. He's the only one."

"Right," Sapnap says in full disbelief. "What — ?"

Tommy turns and walks away.

He doesn't look back.

It's the final time he will ever goes to Wyoming — to the Preserve, and he brings with him the one thing that Dream always wanted from him: a Cure. Tommy doesn't do it for Dream though. He doesn't do it for the Animal Army. He doesn't even do it for himself. This is all for Sam. It's for everything that his dad lost to keep him safe.

Tommy goes home.

He knows the Cure doesn't fix everything, because life after the Great Crumble will always be different. It doesn't fix the last sixteen years of death, and pain, and suffering. Tommy knows, but he watches everyone attempt to pick up broken pieces of this world and form something new out of them anyway.

He watches himself begin to heal.

He watches as this crumbling world overrun by nature and Men that Sam taught him about changes.

Chapter End Notes

CW: implied emotional manipulation/dehumanization/experimentation (reference to needles)

Wow, we've finally reached the end of this au, although I may still write a prequel on Sam/The Animal Army, just depends how motivated I feel. I really hope you guys enjoyed the ending. As I said in chapter 5, this au means so much to me and I'm glad I could continue it a little further. I'm especially glad I could hit the last plot point of Sweet Tooth that I hadn't yet. I had it in my head for a long time that Tommy was going to be the one to find the Cure; however, I also left a lot unanswered on purpose. There's a few other things that were so fun to add too (the L'manberg Anthem, the Will-i-am arguement, Michael. I love Schlatt and Connor sm too).

Update: I realized after looking into it that updating via an author's note is better than updating via a chapter. I'm still learning how to handle multi-chapter works/a series. TY!

1. The next part of this AU (about Purpled) is out, so go read it if you're interested!
2. I changed my name to hump7y_dump7y. It just fits better with my other usernames.
3. I went back and edited. It was mostly grammar, but there's some extra stuff too!! so if you see something new, that's why :)

Thank you guys so much for 600+ kudos and 10,000+ hits!! I have no words!!

And as always, feel free to leave a comment (even just a POG). I also really appreciate kudos and bookmarks too!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!